*Fig. 1. Khaled al-Nahnah, a contemporary hakawati in Beirut, Lebanon. Image by the author.*

# THE ENDANGERMENT AND RE-CREATION OF AN INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE ELEMENT: THE CASE OF *HAKAWATI*, LEBANON'S ORAL STORYTELLING TRADITION[1]

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*Lebanon is a cradle of antiquities that has withstood time and its historical transitions become an epitome of 'living heritage', which is the essence of intangible cultural heritage. The country thrives with various intangible cultural heritage elements. This article focuses particularly on the* hakawati*, the traditional art of storytelling, a shared heritage that is practiced in Lebanon, Syria, Palestine and other Arab countries. Due to modernity and social transformation, the traditional oral storytelling of* hakawati *faced endangerment in the recent past. However, an interesting phenomenon has transformed this oral storytelling tradition, paving the way for its re-creation within the modern context. The objectives of the research were to identify the causes of the endangerment of* hakawati *in the past and to analyze how it was recreated in the contemporary context as a living heritage. The researcher chose Lebanon as a case study because the country has experienced political conflicts that brought about horrendous effects on cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible.*

***Keywords:***
*intangible cultural heritage* – hakawati – *oral traditions – storytelling – Lebanon*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Various intangible cultural heritage (ICH) elements around the world face endangerment for a number of reasons – one of them being political conflicts faced by some communities who are the bearers and practitioners of ICH. The continuity of ICH is threatened, as communities cannot freely practice their cultural traditions because of pressures within their territories, which have resulted in their displacement and marginalization.

Lebanon was chosen as a case study for the research because the country has experienced several political conflicts over the years, which have stirred civil wars. And these have evidently caused horrendous human losses and devastating damages to infrastructures, villages, the lives of human beings and their living environments in general. Cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible, has equally suffered.

The objective was to analyze how some ICH elements survive and how others become endangered. Among ICH endangered elements, the research focused on finding the possibilities for their revitalization. At the same time, it was essential to study the community or the practitioners of the ICH as to their capacity to decide which ICH elements they wished to keep practicing and which they would voluntarily or involuntarily surrender for endangerment and extinction.

In analyzing the endangerment and vitality of the *hakawati*, the ethnographic methodology was used to research the significant transformations and re-creations that the ICH element has undergone through time. The research is descriptive in nature. Data was gathered from interviews with storytellers in Beirut and Tripoli and from secondary sources.

## 2. LEBANON'S ORAL STORYTELLING TRADITION: *HAKAWATI*

Lebanon is rich in various ICH elements. Among the most interesting is the traditional art of storytelling, known as the '*hakawati*.' It is a shared oral heritage, practiced in Lebanon, Syria, Palestine and other Arab countries.

Long before there were televisions, cinemas and electronic gadgets, *hakawati* used to be one of the leisure activities in Lebanon, usually done in coffee shops, outside mosques and other public spaces.
The word *hakawati* derives its origin from the terms

[1] *The present article is a summary of the author's dissertation for the master's programme in Dynamics of Cultural Landscapes and Heritage Management (DYCLAM), through an Erasmus Mundus scholarship grant. Under this programme the author had the opportunity to go on a mission and research about the endangerment and vitality of Lebanon's ancient storytelling tradition, the hakawati.*

*Fig. 2. During a rehearsal at the the Arab Puppet Theatre Foundation in Beirut, Lebanon. Image by the author.*

'hekaye' and 'haki'. In Arabic, 'hekaye' means story while 'haki' means to talk. *Hakawati* is the term for both the practice of storytelling and the storyteller himself. The *hakawati* storytelling is also an avenue for emotional, political, social and literary expression.

By tradition, the *hakawati* is a male and his audiences in coffee shops and public spaces are also males. In ancient times, owing to Arab culture, men were more active than women. However, it is not only males who had been telling and narrating stories over the course of time; women at home also told stories, particularly bedtime stories.

It is important to pinpoint that the *hakawati*'s storytelling ability was not only defined by the stories he told but also by his inventiveness in the manner that he told his stories, through improvisation.

According to the informants of this research, the *hakawati* initially does not know the exact details of his story. In the course of improvising his plot, the details of his stories are unfolded. He improvises the plot of his stories depending on the perception of his audience. The *hakawati* carries no accessories or props to enhance his storytelling, he only has his voice and body to use for the narration. Sometimes the *hakawati* has a cane; depending on the characters of his stories this cane can be transformed into a lion, a bird or any creature of his stories. Every element of the *hakawati*'s storytelling comes from him alone, no outside sources whatsoever. A *hakawati* can make a story last for a whole month; he is able to prolong his story by suspending its ending every night through cliffhangers. Usually, to sustain the anticipation of his audience, he will finish the story with suspense or he will leave his audience anxious for his next storytelling. Some people in the community would sleep outside the house of the *hakawati*, to persuade him to tell what happens next. In earlier times, people were so hooked and involved in the stories of the *hakawati*, that they would take sides with the characters and literally fight against each other.

An important aspect of ancient storytelling is its attachment to the cycle of life. Similar to life, the storytelling follows a course of movement; it is dynamic and evolving. Because the *hakawati* literally depends on his audience, if he gets approval for his stories he continues, but if the audience does not like them he stops (Mattar, 2017).

Usually, the *hakawati*'s stories are old epics, folktales, fables and myths that depict heroism and love, such as the stories of Antarah and Ablah, an ancient Bedouin poem about the love story of the black warrior Antarah in pursuing Ablah, and the stories from One-thousand-and-one-nights, particularly Sinbad the sailor's story.

Another significant influence on storytelling is the introduction of the café culture. In the 16th century the Ottoman Empire occupied the Middle East, including Lebanon. The Ottomans brought with them traditions that would later be assimilated in the Lebanese culture. When the Ottomans brought their coffee, cafés became part of local communities, where the *hakawatis* would find room for storytelling (Collelo, 1989).

### 2.1. THE ELEMENTS OF *HAKAWATI*

The storytelling tradition of *hakawati* consists of five important aspects, according to Yousuf (2014):

*"-The narrative: Every selected story should have a strong plot that captures the interest of listeners.*

*-The characters: There must be a minimum of three to four characters in the story, who interact and move the story towards its climax.*

*-The action: The story must have sound and fury - a clash of kings, an adventure in high seas or a quest for something over a vast expanse of sand dunes. The sweep of the story and its setting is what engages the listener.*

*-The spectacle: This includes music and colours that work as symbols; for example, blue to represent the sea or yellow for sand or the sun. The spectacle helps the audience to be willingly led inside the core of the tale.*

*-The message: Stories must act as an important community service. The storyteller therefore, bears the responsibility of communicating to the people at large the importance of living a principled life."*

From the research conducted, the following are the elements constituting the essential aspects of *hakawati*:

• Voice – Since the *hakawati* does not have any props or costumes, his voice is one of the tools he can use to attract the attention of the audience. His voice also plays an essential role in the development of his characters and his plot. He can change the tone of his voice depending on his characters and their emotions.

• Stories – The narratives, the plots and the characters that the *hakawati* has creatively woven become the stories or the folktales, epics, fables and myths which, in the ancient times, played an important role in the lives of the people and their communities. Through those stories, not only were people entertained but they were also educated with moral values and received news and information about what was happening in their villages back then.

• Audience – The *hakawati* is nothing without his audience. The audience was a basic element in the *hakawati*'s telling of his stories, because the *hakawati* based the plot or narrative that he chose to tell, on his audience. If he felt that his audience enjoyed the plot of his story he continued, if he felt that they were disinterested, he would end it.

• Improvisation skill – The essence of the traditional *hakawati* storytelling lies in the *hakawati*'s ability to improvise the stories and his creativity to prolong their plot, which could sometimes span over a whole month. It is definitely a remarkable skill to be able to capture and sustain the attention of the audience in such a way as to make the village people show up in cafes each and every night.

### 2.2. ROLES OF THE *HAKAWATI*

Kassir, a Lebanese contemporary storyteller (personal interview conducted in 2017), said that the *hakawati* was the most learned man in the village. She mentioned yet another function of the *hakawati* that of being the source of news and information in the community. He was also a public figure since everybody in the village knew him.

According to Hajjar, a contemporary storyteller from Tripoli, Lebanon (2017), the *hakawati* was also an advertiser. He told us a story about a *hakawati* who had failed to show up and tell stories at a café in Tripoli. He had suffered stomach trouble because of eating too many sweets from a famous shop in the village. The news went around the village that the shop had made the *hakawati* sick and should therefore be avoided. Desperate, its owner approached the *hakawati* and begged him to start telling good stories about his shop so that people would come back to him again. So, the *hakawati* made stories about how wonderful the sweets of the shop were and the people returned and started shopping there again.

The *hakawati* had a political aspect too, as he had the freedom to choose and tell whatever story he pleased. This gave him power in the community, shaping the minds of the people (Nahnah, 2017). At times, the *hakawati* became a mediator who helped in resolving conflicts within the community. He would, for example, improvise a story full of metaphors and folktales, transmitting moral messages which could pacify conflicts among community members.

The *hakawati* also played a significant role in special occasions in the village, for instance in weddings, by entertaining the guests with his stories (Hourani, 2017).

## 3. THE THREATS TO THE ENDANGERMENT OF *HAKAWATI*

UNESCO's 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) recognized that the "processes of globalization and social transformation gave rise to the threats of deterioration, disappearance and destruction of ICH" (UNESCO, 2003). "Specifically, the characteristics of globalization are new technologies, new economic relationships, new social processes and new political developments" (Hudson & Lowe, 2004).

Globalization and modernity go together. Both have been posing consequences to traditional practices of ICH around the world, especially to the practitioners and bearers of ICH.

During fieldwork, I found out that the last storyteller, who practiced the ancient oral storytelling tradition of *hakawati*, had died in 1974. He came from Saida, a city in the south of Lebanon. His last performance as a *hakawati* was in 1969.

Mountcastle (2010) made an interesting argument about the hidden political reasons that lie behind cultural loss:

*"...cultural loss is not simply the inevitable consequence of the forward march of progress. It is also a matter of politics. History is rife with examples of people's way of life being viewed as backward and barbaric and in urgent need of change and uplifting. This determination or judgment is not neutral. Sometimes change is brought about using the "carrot" method, and sometimes the "stick," but these events implicate deep power relations."*

Similarly, the endangerment of *hakawati* has, to a large extent, been due to politics and the power interrelations that have influenced the country over the years. Its historical narrative was influenced by the Phoenicians and the rulers from Assyria, Babylon and Persia, then came the classical rulings of the Hellenistic and the Roman eras, after which the Medieval rule came to power with the Arab and Ottoman occupations, which lasted for hundreds of years. Later on, in the 20th century, there was the colonial influence of the French mandate and the creation of the Republic of Lebanon in 1943 (Collelo, 1989). From then on, a series of political conflicts resulted in crises, civil wars, bombings, Syrian occupation and the political conflict with Israel.

With such a political narrative and colonial influences, those historical transitions propelled drastic impacts on the Lebanese people and their society, which brought about societal change, mutation and transformation. These social transformations also spurred significant effects on Lebanon's cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible.

In particular, the vitality in the practice of *hakawati* has been affected by Lebanon's historical transitions. According to Skounti (2008), in the advent of break-in continuity or continuity in broken times, the ICH will undergo modes of adaptation, survival or voluntary and involuntary disappearance:

*"In the absence of a new function, these elements risk disappearing. However, what these agents do not realize is that these elements of ICH are not, and cannot be, the same ever again: they become other, including those who own and perform them. Their survival depends on sacrificing something of what contributes to their supposed 'authenticity'. The fact that they are considered as heritage introduces in their midst a new, hitherto unsuspected, dimension. Heritage agents are convinced that these elements are 'authentic', faithful manifestations of what they have always been, timeless. But this is only an 'authentic illusion'".*

Analyzing the endangerment of the *hakawati* in relation to functionalism and viability, the social transition and the transformation of the Lebanese society paved the way for old needs to diminish. The former function of the *hakawati* was for leisure, news, information, conflict resolution and advertising. His former role in the community was replaced by individuals who have more specific functions in modern society. Nowadays, people have more choices for entertainment and leisure such as movies, plays, television. News and

*Fig. 3. Khaled al-Nahnah tells a story as a* 'hakawati' *in front of Lebanese children at the Souks of Beirut, Lebanon. Image by the author.*

information can be easily accessed through television and the internet. Advertising has also been a key player in modern society, considering capitalism and consumerism operated by globalization. In terms of conflict resolution, the field has become more specialized by legal institutions and organizations working for peace and mediation. Therefore, with such an abundance of new and specialized functions, in the modern context the traditional *hakawati* had to step back and face endangerment.

## 4. TRANSFORMATION AND RE-CREATION OF ORAL STORYTELLING IN LEBANON

ICH derives its essence from transformation and re-creation. In the aspect of authenticity, what distinguishes ICH is that it does not have one (Skounti, 2008). UNESCO's 2003 Convention for Safeguarding of the ICH recognized and used the term 're-creation' to describe the process that communities follow to produce and reproduce their ICH. It is therefore natural and organic that the practice of traditions will be transformed and re-created over time, considering the factors that affect the practice and practitioners of ICH.

Despite the fragility of ICH, it is also an epitome of resilience. Compared to material heritage, which can be easily destroyed in short periods of time, intangible heritage survives longer. ICH can by far outlive the lifespan of its bearers and practitioners:

*"Even in the longue durée, transcending the generations of individuals who transmit this heritage from one to the other, it never simply disappears. On the contrary, it is transformed, adapted, hidden (sometimes to reappear with more vigor), it retracts or expands depending on circumstances, it scatters the micro-elements that make up this heritage to be incorporated into new, emerging cultural traits, and so forth. The transcendence of the elements of intangible heritage, compared to that of individuals, allows these elements to have a longer life"* (Skounti, 2008).

The case of the *hakawati* epitomizes Skounti's explanation as to the transformation of an intangible cultural heritage element. The death of the last traditional *hakawati* storyteller cannot be considered a cultural loss and it cannot be translated into extinction because the ancient storytelling tradition evolved into contemporary storytelling practices. Rather, the last

traditional *hakawati*'s death becomes a rupture to the vitality of the oral storytelling tradition.

### 4.1. BRIEFER ON LEBANON'S CIVIL WAR

The transformation and the evolution of the *hakawati* as an oral storytelling tradition has been greatly influenced by the political conflicts that took place in Lebanon, one of their manifestations being the Lebanese civil war.

The Lebanese civil war erupted on the 13th of April 1975 and lasted for almost 15 years, with a loss of roughly 150,000 lives, with 300,000 injured, spurring the emigration of almost one million people to different parts of the world. The primary cause of this civil war was the clash between the Phalangists - a Christian militia - and the Palestinian factions that had been fighting Israel from the territory of Lebanon.

From 1975 to 1990 the Lebanese State was destabilized by a series of related conflicts between shifting alliances. Five significant periods have defined the tensions brought about by the conflicts: from 1975 to November 1976 there was a two-year war; between November 1976 and June 1982 there was a long interlude of unsuccessful peace and conflict resolution, with the Israeli and Syrian intervention and a series of more internal conflicts; from June 1982 to February 1984, the invasion of Lebanon by Israel; during the late 1980s' internal wars and from 1988-1990 there were intra-Christian wars which paved the way for the end of the war. In between these conflict periods, horrendous massacres, battles and assassinations cloaked the Lebanese state. According to Chami (2003), car bombs and planted bombs comprised another category of mass violence, which claimed more than 3,000 lives, most of whom civilians.

Thousands of personal accounts and testimonies about the civil war were written in Arabic, French and English, which served as a memorialization that sought to challenge and criticize the established versions and histories of the war. According to Haugbolle (2011):

*"Memory work should of course be treated critically, as it often serves ideological purposes. Having said that, memory culture is not just a collection of dubious sources. Constructions of memory in post-war Lebanon*

*Fig. 4. Barrak Sabih in one of his performances as a a 'hakawati' in Lebanon. Image by the author.*

*also point to narratives about history. History is not just numbers, dates and facts, but equally the telling of stories, and the blending of events into salient narratives. In Lebanon, there are many different narratives, many different histories of the war. Any attempt to write a history of the war – or to forge a national history – must start by acknowledging the multiplicity of historical narratives".*

In this spirit, contemporary storytellers embarked on sharing with the public stories about the war.

**4.2. POSTWAR FORGETTING CULTURE**

In order to understand the revival of contemporary storytellers and their role of telling stories about the war, also the reason they should be telling these war stories to the present society, it can be traced from Lebanon's state-sponsored policy of post-war silence and a culture of impunity. These traits, according to Michael Young quoted by Craig Larkin (2012), should not be mistaken for a 'collective amnesia' or a national 'culture of forgetfulness' but rather be analyzed according to a discursive approach of the past, which has competing and conflicting historical narratives. The failure of Lebanon to address the country's 15-year Civil War did not only contribute to heightened sectarian tensions but was also the cause of creating a culture of impunity (Knutsen, 2014), which allowed for unconvicted war criminals to walk through the streets of Beirut and corridors of Parliament. The tedious or the lack of "legal handling of crimes committed during the war have also contributed to a culture of amnesia" (Haugbolle, 2005).

The culture of forgetting became the aftermath of the civil war; there was a huge effort to achieve the commemoration and production of a collective national history for Lebanon. The Lebanese state refused to engage in public discourse concerning war commemoration and the creation of an open space for the Lebanese society to engage in a public debate. Makdisi (1997) argued that through a semi-public reconstruction project, sponsored by the late Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri, the Lebanese state purposely erased memories and reminders of the war. Hariri (2011) aimed to build a downtown memory-space that only portrayed the good aspects of Lebanon's pre-war years, completely ignoring the war. The state's agenda to impose a culture of forgetting has also penetrated an ideological state apparatus, the schools. As proof of the nonexistence of a state-sanctioned narrative about the civil war:

*"…history lessons in Lebanese high schools essentially conclude with Lebanon's independence from their French mandate in 1943 while the civil war, most of its preamble, and all of its aftermath, are excluded from the pedagogical realm. Needless to say, the absence of an institutional space in which Lebanon's catastrophic national past can be discussed, deliberated, and examined, hinders not only the possibility of reflection about the civil war but also obstructs the emergence of a multivocal national narrative"* (Tarraf, 2011).

As an implication to Lebanon's postwar silence, a 'hypermnesia' has been created, a term coined by Jens Hanssen and Daniel Genberg (2002) to refer to "an environment where memory is constantly present, multiple and celebrated" as a way to rethink and confront war memories through the proliferation of seminars, conferences, workshops, films, books and artwork. Such public memory discourses have been characterized by Larkin (2012) as four broad trends: healing, engagement, resistance and revolution.

'Revealing is healing,' this first trend is a therapeutic approach initiated by victims, civil rights groups and activists who have goals of finding personal closure and national unity grounded on truth and reconciliation. Engagement, the second trend, somehow epitomizes catharsis and produces materials and content that explored and criticized violence through literary and artistic mediums, such as war-inspired personal memoirs, novels, plays and exhibitions that tackled themes of pain, forgiveness and identity. The third trend is associated with Lebanese nostalgia as an instrument to resist post-war change and the homogenizing and questionable function of reconstruction. Khalaf (2006) further explained the growth of Lebanese nostalgia in what he called the 'heritage crusade,' wherein there was a hype in the revival of folk arts, poetry, storytelling, films, novels and autobiographies, whose main subject is the recollection of the past. Finally, the fourth trend is memory recovery, which becomes an avenue for political revolution, a typical approach of leftist intellectuals and civil society groups who criticize Lebanon's ruling elite and oppose the country's culture of sectarianism (Haugbolle, 2007; Larkin, 2012).

Larkin's four trends of public memory discourse are all manifested in the transformation of the oral storytelling tradition in Lebanon through various initiatives, such as autobiographical storytelling, monodrama, puppet theatre and the re-creation of the *hakawati* in modern society.

### 4.3. CONTEMPORARY STORYTELLERS

The traditional ancient storytelling tradition of hakawati has been transformed and re-created because of social mutations and transformations brought about by the civil wars and political conflicts that erupted in Lebanon. The storytelling practice was revived through a recent phenomenon of autobiographical storytelling which had been drawing crowds in Beirut. Two autobiographical storytelling groups have been organizing community storytelling events, where individuals could share their personal stories on specific themes such as migration, LGBT, exile and oppression. One of the storytelling groups is called 'Cliffhangers'. It was started by Dima Matta in 2014, a Beirut-based university lecturer, actress and storyteller. According to Matta, she re-introduced storytelling in the community as a homage to the region's storytelling tradition.

During the interview with Dima, she said that storytelling becomes significant especially in conflicted areas as a means to communicate with one another so as to make living together easier. The stories become accounts of memory recollection about the civil war. She had the idea of creating a safe space through her storytelling community, where everybody is equal regardless of age, gender, religion or socio-economic background. She also mentioned that in Lebanon there is no public space and, for a very long time, the voices of the Lebanese people were not heard. Similar to the old tradition of *hakawati*, the autobiographical storytelling events are held in cafes but this time it is not only men who tell and listen to the stories.

'Hakaya' is another autobiographical storytelling community, initiated by journalists based in Lebanon, whose objective was to create a space for stories that do not land on the pages of newspapers and news websites. The storytelling community was created in 2016 by four journalists, Dana Ballout, Raja Abdulrahim, Farid Abi-Zeid and Rima Abushakra. Hakaya's storytelling events follow the pattern of an American-based storytelling organization, "The Moth," where people share their personal stories. The storytelling initiative has also grown over the years and created a community sharing personal stories and experiences of its members as a means to strengthen collective memory. The storytellers of Hakaya come from different ages and backgrounds - from Syrian refugees to Western expats - who all sit together and listen to each other's story over coffee, wine or beer. Diversity flourishes from the storytellers to the stories.

For example, in some storytelling events analyzed during this research, the co-owner of the venue told a story about how she left Lebanon during the civil war and the problems she encountered by moving to another country. Another story was told by a Los Angeles Times reporter, who had left her job in the United States to volunteer as an English teacher for Syrian refugees (D'Ignoti, 2017). There were also stories about a brave mother who lost her son in a violent conflict in Tripoli, the second-largest city in the north of Lebanon; a young woman's story on how she put on a veil for the first time; a family's story of the sacrifices they had to make in order to move to a safer country with running water and electricity all the time; a Palestinian who lived in Syria told his grandmother's tale of the 90's about the mass destruction in Yarmouk, a camp in Damascus; a woman's tale of how a school homework led her to discover her Palestinian roots at age 13; and another story about the Syria Street in Tripoli that divides the city[2].

The author had also had the opportunity to interview a female storyteller in Beirut named Sara Kassir. She explained that she is one of the first female Muslims who studied theater in a Christian school. Kassir said that she became a storyteller because she was inspired by her grandmother who told her stories when she was younger. When she became a storyteller herself, she collected all her grandmother's stories. Kassir shared a personal story about the civil war in 2006 when she and her family lost their home to an Israeli bomb. The only thing that was retrieved from the rubbles of her shattered house was her son's birth certificate.

The narratives of the contemporary storytellers exhibit a form of reminder and serve a psychosocial function for collective healing from the effects of political conflicts, state-sponsored silence and culture of impunity. A social landscape has been created by a conflicted society, where oral storytelling thrives and functions as a struggle against the culture of forgetting and demanding accountability for the repercussions of the hostilities that had befallen Lebanon.

### 4.4. OTHER INFLUENCES OF ORAL STORYTELLING

Oral storytelling was also spilled over to other forms of art, such as theatre and puppetry. In 2008, Mahmoud

[2] *Documented stories are uploaded and can be followed at Hakaya's Youtube channel.*

*Fig. 5. An actress rehearsing at Arab Puppet Theatre Foundation in Beirut. Image by the author.*

Hourani, a Palestinian, founded and created the Arab Puppet Theatre Foundation (APTF) in Beirut. Hourani created APTF aiming at the revival of interest in the Arab puppet tradition. During the interview with Hourani he mentioned that the basis of puppetry and any form of theatre production is storytelling. Their productions are created not only to entertain the society but to also criticize the societal maladies that have had effects on the political conflicts and civil wars for the past years in the region. Hourani recounted one of his favorite productions called 'Performance Desperately in Need of an Audience;' the production is a silent show and tells the exile story of people who had jumped on boats and suffered migration by leaving behind their homes and loved ones to seek better lives on the other side of the sea.

Despite the rupture in the ancient oral storytelling tradition of *hakawati*, a small group of actors in Tripoli, Lebanon continue to perform until the present and they re-create the tradition during Ramadan, at the time after people have finished their fasting and said their evening prayers. During the interview with Nazih Kamareddine in Tripoli, one of the storytellers who perform during the Ramadan days, he said that he modernizes the ancient stories of the *hakawatis* of the past. For example, he told the famous ancient tale of Antara and Abla by inserting contemporary references such as letting his characters drink Pepsi Cola and contact each other through mobile phones, things which did not exist in the past. He said that he would also weave political issues in his stories, such as the death of Lebanon's former prime minister Rafiq Hariri, who was assassinated in 2005. In his performances he would also be singing about how Lebanon bled due to confessional divisions and foreign powers. The war in Syria, which is only 35 kilometers away from Tripoli, and the Arab uprisings would also share portions in his storytelling narratives (Constantine, 2012).

One last example is the storytelling performance of Khaled al-Nahnah in the reconstructed Souks of Beirut. He performed in front of children during their summer school. Nahnah is of Palestinian origins but his family moved and sought refuge in Lebanon. He had been using storytelling as a form of social activism, using metaphors and fables to criticize and challenge all the unacceptable facts within the realities of the present. He said that there are two types of storytelling, 'the atelier' and 'the spectacle.' The atelier is a course

in storytelling where anyone can learn the art and methods of storytelling from experienced storytellers, while the spectacle is a show or performance tailored for an audience. Not only as storytellers do they perform shows but they also developed heritage transmission initiatives through teaching. Moreover, his storytelling projects in different refugees camps around Lebanon become a form of psychosocial therapy and healing.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The re-creation of oral storytelling in Lebanon is anchored in the will and struggle of the people to form a collective memory about a historical narrative they were deprived of. The stories that storytellers and the people have told, are telling and will be telling are manifestations of resistance against the state-sponsored silence and culture of impunity that has befallen the country after the civil war. Indeed, political conflicts, social transformations and modernity have brought about the endangerment of *hakawati*. The civil war has incited fear among the Lebanese and this made public events, such as storytelling, become less and less frequent because of bombings and massacres. Social transformations and the movement towards modernity also affected the role of the *hakawati* in the lives of people. In the past, one of the roles of the *hakawati* was that of a messenger, the source of news in the village. Yet, due to the advent of modernity, the *hakawati* was replaced by modern technology and other forms of leisure.

Considering that *hakawati* is an intangible cultural heritage element that constantly evolves and is continuously re-created, the oral storytelling tradition was revived by contemporary storytellers in Lebanon, serving new functions as an instrument for memorialization and a vehicle for catharsis.

It is interesting to note that during the past, when ancient *hakawatis* told their stories, they had the agency to end their stories even if those stories lasted for a month or months, depending on their audience. However, the storytellers and the people who tell their stories in Lebanon's contemporary time, do not know when their stories and memory recollections about the various conflicts that cloaked the country, will finish or will have an ending. Until then, the ICH of storytelling will serve its cathartic function in a society where people tell their stories in order to feel alive.

The Lebanese case study has shown that sometimes conflicts do not endanger the practice of ICH. They can actually have opposite effects. The conflicts, particularly the aftermath of the civil wars in Lebanon, have created a social landscape, an environment and a function for the ICH of oral storytelling to thrive and become a necessity for a society that has suffered a state-sponsored silence and a culture of impunity. Oral storytelling functions as a crusade against forgetting and an instrument for healing, engagement, resistance and revolution.

"*Civil wars are not to be erased from reality or from memory. They are only reborn or reincarnated. Banished from the written, they take to the spoken. Erased from memory, they colonize the subconscious*", according to the Lebanese writer Elias Khoury (2002).

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