

International team to examine critical role of culture in building peace and preventing conflict

An international team will embark on a major project to expose and build on the critical role of culture in enhancing possibilities for sustainable peace and preventing conflict.

The four-year, Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded initiative, *Imagining Futures*, stems from the question of who decides what should continue to be remembered into the future and how. It aims to bring to the fore the many voices that create history, and the importance of co-existing narratives. These it seeks to activate beyond their resting place in archives, archaeological sites, galleries, libraries, and museums.

The premise of *Imagining Futures through Un/Archived Pasts* is that archives are negotiations about visions of the future – whose story will continue to be told and how, and whose silenced – and that these become acute in moments of post-conflict, displacement and reconstruction.

The team will do this through creating protocols for egalitarian archival practices. Their interdisciplinary network will connect creators and institutions in Africa, the Middle East, North America and Europe, including the UK. It will include people working across memory institutions and in regions experiencing post-conflict, displacement and reconstruction.

Work will include exploratory labs, first in Lebanon, Tanzania and Ghana, which will be followed by commissioned projects, the creation of new archives, reading existing archives against the grain, and (re)thinking sites of memory and what their activation or de-activation means for people on the ground.

It will seek out ways of creating and connecting repositories, opening up closed archives and ensuring that the narratives of people who are in precarious contexts are also given equal value. That these are also sensitively treated, preserved and form part of the wider story not only as exceptions but as an integral part of the history we all share.

We are used to thinking of archives as paper records stored in vaults or increasingly as digital data. But poetry, folk-stories, song, recipes, revolutionary slogans, graffiti, objects, war landscapes, festival sites, bomb-shelters, neighbourhoods or camps, are also traces that tell of a past that form a history.

Professor Elena Isayev, from the University of Exeter, who will lead the project, said: “We want to expose the power which comes with being part of deciding what pasts remain into the future. Not to create one single ‘right’ story, but to understand the value in recognising and respecting, multiple narratives, even ones that may contradict each other. How can this be done ethically? We also want to work with reconstruction and humanitarian projects, to ensure that practices do not create further vulnerabilities – for example through over-writing histories and trauma, or creating further displacements. Also often in fragile moments and spaces, such as camps, people may be constantly observed and archived by outsiders, but do not get a chance to tell their story. What does it mean to create a camp archive, an archive of lived lives in a place that is not meant to exist?”

Writing from such experience, Yousif M. Qasmiyeh, one of the project researchers from Oxford University, expresses this in his poem *Writing the Camp-Archive*: “Who writes the camp and what is it that ought to be written in a time where the plurality of lives has traversed the place itself to become its own time.”

By allowing archives to be formed by drawing on local knowledges and joint decision-making it is hoped the collections will be better able to counter stereotypes, discrimination, and the lack of appreciation for shared histories. The research team hope this could help to reduce conflict within and between groups, and make sure the interests of millions who live in precarious conditions are not excluded. They will advocate for culture’s role in building just, peaceful, inclusive societies and for its official recognition as a human need.

On thinking into future pasts one of the project partners, Tawny Paul, director of the Public History Initiative at University of California, LA, said: "History is incredibly important to the present. We use it to understand who we are and where we came from, and to justify relationships of power and status. In an increasingly fractured world, *Imagining Futures* will provide a model of how academic expertise, artistic practice and local forms of knowledge can be integrated to create inclusive histories and to transform how we record the past."

Imagining Futures Through Un/Archived Pasts has been awarded £ 2 million by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC). The Network Plus grant is part of the Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) scheme. Of this amount £800 000 is un-committed and will be competitively awarded for inspiring commissions.

Along with Elena Isayev (University of Exeter) the other co-investigators and hub leaders are: in the UK Peter Campbell (Cranfield University); in Baddawi Camp, Lebanon – Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (University College London), Yousif M. Qasmiyeh (Oxford University and Baddawi); in Beirut, Lebanon – Howayda Al-Harithy with Ali Khodr and Batoul Yassine (American University of Beirut); in London, UK – Mick Finch, Louisa Minkin, Elizabeth Wright (all at Central Saint Martins UAL), Ceri Ashley (Endangered Material Knowledge Programme at the British Museum); in Accra, Ghana – Kodzo Gavua (University of Ghana); in Mtwara and Lindi, Tanzania – Nancy Rushohora (Stellenbosch University), Valence Silayo (Tumaini University Dar es Salaam College).

Other Researchers include: Aqeel Abdulla (University of Exeter), Camillo Boano (London Urban Lab, UCL), Zonke Guddah (University of Ghana), Edwar Hanna (Syrbanism), Mark Kaplan (Greymatter, South Africa), Laura Madokoro (Carleton University), Tawny Paul (UCLA).

Other Partners include: Baddawi Camp Cultural Club (Lebanon), Benedictine Abbey in Ndanda (Tanzania), British International Research Institutes (in Europe, Middle East and Turkey), Lindi Region Commissioners Office (Tanzania), National Museum of Tanzania – MajiMaji War Museum in Songea (Tanzania).

The project Advisors are: Jerri Daboo (Drama, Exeter), Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela (Historical Trauma & Transformation, Stellenbosch), Jennifer Hyndman (Refugee Studies, York U. Toronto), Rohit Jigyasu (ICCROM), Jala Makhzoumi (Landscape Design AUBeirut).

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Notes to editors:

1. Please refer to the AHRC GCRF Network Plus website at <https://ahrc.ukri.org/funding/internationalfunding/the-global-challenges-research-fund/gcrf-network-plus/>.
2. The Imagining Futures website can be found at <http://imaginingfutures.exeter.ac.uk/>