



Exploring Shared Narratives and Egypt's Living Heritage through Street Nomenclature: A Case Study of *Dārb al-Māhābeel* Street, Historic Cairo

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Abstract

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Cairo's vibrant urban fabric is distinguished by its diverse and deeply rooted tangible and intangible cultural heritage, with each district embodying unique narratives reflecting local history, traditions, and community practices. *Dārb al-Māhābeel* Street in Historic Cairo exemplifies this phenomenon as a locus where everyday practices, oral narratives, and built heritage once converged to form a distinctive cultural identity. This paper investigates *Dārb al-Māhābeel*, as a vital component of Cairo's tangible cultural heritage, focusing on the community's shared narratives associated with the street and exploring the origins of its nomenclature. In particular, it highlights key traditions and practices maintained by its residents and visitors, such as the traditional *Būza* beverage, which functioned as a cultural hallmark linked to the street's social interactions. This paper employs a qualitative methodology through focus-group interviews with local community members. These interviews aim to explore collective memories, perceptions of the street's evolution, and the enduring rituals and practices connected to its historical legacy. The findings reveal that most original cultural and social practices, including the once-prevalent *Būza* taverns, have significantly diminished in recent years, leaving behind only the street sign as a tangible marker of its cultural identity. Despite this, the toponym continues to serve as a vessel of collective memory, maintaining a symbolic connection to the street's historical significance. Furthermore, neighborhood elders emerge as key custodians of cultural heritage, playing a crucial role in transmitting micro-histories and communal narratives to younger generations. Moreover, this paper contributes to the broader understanding of urban spaces as repositories of collective memory and emphasizes the importance of safeguarding intangible cultural heritage through active community engagement and heightened historical awareness.

1. Introduction

According to UNESCO, the living heritage, or intangible cultural heritage (ICH), often has tangible objects, artifacts, or places associated with it. Despite the fact that the intangible

cultural heritage may not possess physical tangibility, it often complements and embodies tangible cultural heritage represented in these elements. In practice, the tangible heritage epitomizes intangible components (UNESCO, 2004).

UNESCO's recognition of the intangible cultural heritage associated with street naming practices emphasizes the importance of these to the communal narratives adopted by local communities. These names often represent shared memories, collective values, socio-cultural narratives, and historical identities, thereby fostering a sense of belonging and cultural continuity. Furthermore, they serve as oral and written testimonies that preserve the community's historical consciousness amid rapid urbanization and modernization (UNESCO, 2003).

UNESCO highlights the importance of place names as repositories of intangible cultural heritage, emphasizing their role in fostering a sense of belonging and collective memory. The practice of street naming and renaming, especially in post-colonial and revolutionary contexts, illustrates how shared narratives are negotiated and redefined within the urban fabric (UNESCO, 2013).

Egypt's streets are a treasure trove of shared heritage narratives, reflecting the country's rich and multifaceted history, tradition, and cultural practices. They exhibit a profound collection of ancient Egyptian, Christian, Jewish, and Islamic heritage, each representing distinct historical eras (Sayed *et al.*, 2013).

Egypt's street names are more than mere labels; they serve as living narratives that encapsulate the history, culture, and collective memory of the local communities. They often carry deep historical and cultural significance, reflecting the rich heritage and shared narratives of the country and its living community. These street names also function as a reminder of Egypt's diverse past, encompassing ancient civilizations, Islamic influences, and more recent historical events. Furthermore, they act as a connection to the past, honoring influential figures, pivotal events, and the diverse layers of Egyptian heritage. In addition, they provide residents and visitors with a tangible link to Egypt's rich history and the shared narratives that have shaped the country over time (Hassan, 2014).

In this regard, Egyptian streets demonstrate the interplay between tangible and intangible cultural heritage, enriching the understanding and preservation of a community's heritage. By recognizing and safeguarding intangible cultural heritage, UNESCO ensures the holistic preservation of collective narratives, cultural practices, and traditions that give life and meaning to tangible elements (UNESCO, 2003).

2. The Nomenclature of the Egyptian Streets within a Heritage Context

The streets of any city may be regarded as an open historical archive, narrating not only the story of the city itself but also reflecting broader national histories. In the Egyptian context, systematic street naming and signage were not introduced until the era of *Muhammad 'Alī* Pasha in the early 19th century. It is worthy here to mention that *Muhammad 'Alī* Pasha was the first ruler in Egypt to issue a decree mandating the assignment of official names to streets. He

also ordered that visible signs be installed to indicate the streets' names. In addition, it was his directive to assign numbers to buildings along each street to facilitate the collection of taxes, the delivery of official correspondence and the maintenance of civil records (الطرابيلي، 2000).

Prior to this period, urban areas were typically identified by broader geographical or communal markers, such as the name of a resident tribe, the concentration of a specific craft or trade, or the prominent ownership of land and buildings such as the notable case of *ʿAbdīn* district which is the home of *ʿAbdīn* Palace that is named after *ʿAbdīn* Bey, a military commander under *Mūḥammād ʿAlī* Pasha who owned a mansion on the site of the palace. When Khedive *Ismāʿīl* acquired the land for the construction of the government headquarters—later known as *ʿAbdīn* Palace—the original name of the site was preserved (الرافعي، 1987). Consequently, the legacy of *ʿAbdīn* Bey was perpetuated not through the survival of his residence, but through the enduring naming of the surrounding district and its main square, both of which continue to bear his name (عبد الرحمن، 2006).

Today, Egyptian street nomenclature encompasses references to significant historical events, prominent figures, geographical features, and traditional occupations, creating a layered tapestry of stories that tell the story of the city and its people. Walking through these streets reveals that each name often carries a story, embodying shared histories and collective memories (الطرابيلي، 2000).

For instance, many streets in Cairo and other Egyptian cities bear names linked to historical figures such as *Sālāḥ al-Dīn* Street, honoring the legendary Muslim leader *Sālāḥ al-Dīn*, whose enduring influence is intertwined with Egypt's medieval history. Similarly, streets like *al-Mūʿizz li-dīn Allāh* in Cairo, named after the first Fatimid caliph in Egypt, evoke the city's Islamic legacy and medieval grandeur, serving as a testament to its extensive cultural heritage. Conversely, nomenclature like Nile Street underscores the significance of geographic features that have historically impacted the development of Egyptian civilization and urban morphology, highlighting the integral role of the natural environment in shaping community identity (جومار، 1988).

Many historic districts in Cairo feature streets with unique and often enigmatic names that encapsulate multiple layers of the local community. While some of these streets are widely recognized, others remain obscure. *Dārb al-Māhābeel* street in Historic Cairo exemplifies this phenomenon. Its appellation functions as a linguistic index of collective experience that reinforces the street's social identity. The street's designation not only preserves the rich cultural and historical layers embedded within the urban fabric but also evokes the intangible heritage—comprising traditions, narratives, and practices—maintained by residents and visitors alike.

3. Location of *Dārb al-Māhābeel* Street

Dārb al-Māhābeel Street is located within the core of Historic Cairo, which is part of the UNESCO World Heritage site inscribed in 1979 (UNESCO, 2023). This UNESCO inscription encompasses a significant portion of Cairo's historic Islamic urban fabric, incorporating numerous streets, commercial districts, religious edifices and traditional neighborhoods (Raymond, 2000).



Fig. (1). The Location of *Dārb al-Māhābeel* Street. (Google Maps, 2025).

Although *Dārb al-Māhābeel* Street may not receive individual recognition in UNESCO's formal documentation, it lies within the designated boundaries of the world heritage district. The entire zone, including streets like *Dārb al-Māhābeel*, is acknowledged for its outstanding universal value as a cultural historical landscape.

Dārb al-Māhābeel constitutes a historic street in the densely populated quarter of *Abdīn*, one of the central districts of contemporary Cairo. *Dārb al-Māhābeel* extends between *Mūhāmmād Ali* Street and *Abd al-Azīz* Street, near the famous vegetables' market of *al-Ataba* and *al-Mūsky* district (Fig. 1). Administratively, *Dārb al-Māhābeel* follows *Abdīn* post office (*Qīsm*), however, it is geographically closer to *Qīsm al-Mūsky*.

4. Layout and Structure of *Dārb al-Māhābeel* Street

The street of *Dārb al-Māhābeel* is located within *āl-Dārb āl-āHmār* or *āl-khālifā* district. It intersects with smaller alleys and connects to main arteries such as *al-Mū'izz* Street and *āl-khāyāmiyā* (the tentmakers' market). It is surrounded by numerous historic alleyways, small plazas, and religious landmarks (1992، جومار). The most distinctive architectural feature of the area is the so-called "Mosque of Bones", a designation is particularly unusual for an Islamic place of worship. Historically, the site originally served as a cemetery, and subsequent urban development resulted in the construction of residential structures atop the burial grounds. During the construction, it was common for human skeletal remains to be unearthed, which were then respectfully reinterred within the mosque premises. As a result, the site acquired its colloquial name, "Mosque of Bones" (جامع العظام), reflecting the historical and cultural significance associated with local burial practices and customs (2024، البيطار).

Like many old Cairene streets, *Dārb al-Māhābeel* Street is a narrow pedestrian-oriented alley, typically measuring between 2 to 4 meters wide. Its course follows a winding and irregular path with buildings densely packed on either side, generally ranging from 2 to 4 stories in height (1968، المقرزي، 1887، مبارك). These structures are predominantly constructed from brick and limestone, with many retaining traditional architectural features such as *māshrābiya* (wooden lattice balconies). The ground floors commonly accommodate small commercial establishments, while the upper floors serve as residences. Several edifices along the street

preserve architectural elements from the Fatimid and Ottoman periods, including stone facades, arched doorways, and internal courtyards, reflecting the layered historical development of the area (الرزاز، 1995).

5. Etymology of *Dārb al-Māhābeel* Street

The word *Dārb* (دَرْب) means path, way, pass, or trail, a common designation within Egyptian urban nomenclature, and its plural form is *Dūrūb* (دُرُوب), which denotes streets or pathways (Dozy, 1881; Kazimirski, 1860). In fact, the word *Dārb* is not a word of Arabic origin. It has been borrowed from the Ancient Greek *Δέρβη* (*Dérbē*), a border town, near the Cilician Gates, which were the chief mountain-pass, from the direction of the countries occupied by the Arabs, into the territory of the Greek Empire. These "Gates" are mentioned by *al-Idrīsī* as being fortified and guarded by troops who watched the persons going and coming. Hence, any place of entrance or narrow pass between two mountains or gates to that whereto it leads is called by the Arabs *Dārb* in reference to *Dérbē* of the ancient Greek Empire (Lane, 1863).

As for the Arabic word *Māhābeel* (مَهَابِيل), it is a colloquial term that generally means fools or simpletons in many dialects of Egyptian Arabic. It is the plural noun of the word *Māhbūl* (مَهْبُول), which signifies an idiot, a fool, or an individual who has lost his mental faculties (البلعكي، 1995). The term is derived from the Arabic root (هَبَلَ), which in classical Arabic relates to foolishness and stupidity. In addition, the word might be employed to refer to someone who behaves inappropriately, recklessly, or foolishly (إبن منظور، 2009).

Given this, *Dārb al-Māhābeel* can be translated as “Fools Alley”, “The Street of Fools”, or “Alley of Madmen”. Depending on the interpretive context, it may carry a humorous, pejorative, or colloquial connotation, perhaps implying that the street is associated with foolish behavior or serves as a gathering place for eccentric or unconventional individuals.

5.1 The Story Behind the Name of *Dārb al-Māhābeel* Street

Certain street names originate from local narratives, collective memories, and popular folklore. The name of *Dārb al-Māhābeel* Street likely derives from a colloquial nickname reflecting the community's perception of the street—possibly as a place associated with foolishness, eccentricity, or humor (البيطار، 2024). Specifically, it is believed that the designation *Dārb al-Māhābeel*, which may be interpreted as “The Street of the Drunkards” or “The Street of Fools” emerged due to the behaviors exhibited by visitors frequenting the street's numerous *Būza*¹ (غازي، 2023) taverns (بوظة).

¹*Būza*, also spelled *bouza* or *boza*, is a traditional Egyptian beverage known for its unique flavor and cultural significance. Its primary ingredients include grains such as barley or wheat necessary for the fermentation process, which can last from few days to a week, during which the natural sugars are converted into alcohol and carbon dioxide. The alcohol content can vary, reaching up to 7% depending on the fermentation. The resulting liquid is strained, sweetened and sometimes flavored with spices or herbs. *Būza* has a distinct flavor profile that can range from mildly sweet to subtly sour, contingent upon the fermentation process. Its taste is refreshing and shares some similarities with beer, though it is less alcoholic. The color of *Būza* is usually a pale golden to light brown, often clouded due to the presence of yeast, grain mash and lack of filtration (Rodinson, Arberry and Perry, 2001; Darby, Ghalioungui and Grivetti, 1977).

Archival references and oral testimonies indicate that *Dārb al-Māhābeel* acquired this sobriquet because it was historically lined with modest taverns and stalls specializing in inexpensive intoxicants, notably *Būḏa*. Consequently, it was a popular destination that served as a social hub, particularly for individuals seeking leisure and entertainment (عبد رب النبي, (2020).

These *Būḏa* taverns attracted clientele across all age groups seeking affordable recreational activities. Festivities extended into the late hours, and patrons often departed these taverns in an advanced state of inebriation—staggering, weaving, and occasionally collapsing in the narrow alleyways (الكردى, 2023).

This recurring pattern of behavior has contributed to the street's reputation and ultimately to its colloquial name, which not only functions as a disparaging term for intoxicated individuals but also as a reflection of the dynamic social and celebratory history of *Dārb al-Māhābeel* Street. It operates both as a cultural mnemonic, preserving collective memory, and as a linguistic marker that signifies the street's historical role as a nexus of community interaction and social festivities (عبد رب النبي, 2020).

5.2. Social Life and Cultural Identity of *Dārb al-Māhābeel* Street

The street of *Dārb al-Māhābeel* in Historic Cairo is often remembered for its famed *Būḏa* taverns, which evolved into a notable local landmark. However, its historical significance extends far beyond where drunkards gathered. The street served as a vibrant microcosm of popular Cairene life in the early to mid-20th century, reflecting the social fabric, daily struggles, and humor of Egypt's working-class neighborhoods (عبد الفتاح, 2000). Its narrow alleys, communal interactions, and colorful characters embodied the resilience and solidarity characteristic of such areas during this era. The street's social and cultural resonance was so strong that it inspired *Nāgūb Māhfūz* to take part in writing a film carrying the name of *Dārb*

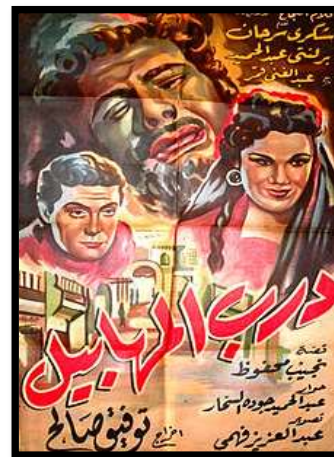


Fig. 2: The poster of *Dārb al-Māhābeel* movie in 1955.
(الخولي, 2024)

The term *Būḏa* originates from the Turkish word *boza*, itself derived from the Farsi word *buze*, which signifies millet and denotes a traditional fermented grain drink prevalent in Ottoman and Central Asian cultures. The adoption of this term into the Arabic language occurred during the medieval Islamic era, largely due to the influence of the Ottoman Turkish, particularly during the time of Ottoman control over Egypt from 1517 to 1867. *Būḏa* is still consumed in Turkey today but is non-alcoholic or only lightly fermented. In contrast, Egyptian *Būḏa* typically retained somewhat elevated alcohol content, classifying it more like a folk beer (Davidson, 2014). In Egypt *Būḏa* was predominantly favored by the working and lower classes, artisans and farmers owing to its affordability and moderate alcoholic strength. It was frequently consumed in hot weather in social settings such as stalls and taverns or within private households to afford greater privacy. *Būḏa* continues to be an integral part of contemporary Egyptian folk culture, especially in the older districts of cities like Cairo and within rural communities. *Būḏa* taverns were common in popular quarters such as *Dārb al-Māhābeel*, where they became not only places for refreshments but also centers for local male social interactions. Over time, some of these establishments became targets of cultural satire, and the phrase “*Būḏa* tavern” came to symbolize chaotic or unconventional in Egyptian popular culture (El Daly, 2005).

al-Māhābeel (Fig. 2), also known as Fools Alley, and produced by *Tāwfiq Sālāh* in 1955 (Kuhn and Westwell, 2020). It revolved around a lottery ticket purchased by a resident at *Dārb al-Māhābeel* that caused trouble and conflicts among the people of the area (نحاس, 1975). This film mainly delves into the socio-economic struggles and the complex human relationships that define urban life in post-colonial Egypt (قاسم, 2024).

Dārb al-Māhābeel is not the only Egyptian street to have had its name immortalized in cinema. Egyptian filmmakers have long drawn inspiration from the urban topography of Cairo using street names not only as titles but as narrative frameworks to explore social, political, and cultural realities. One notable example is *Hārēt el-Sākkāyin* released in 1966 and examines poverty, violence, and masculinity within a tightly knit working-class neighborhood (قاسم, 2024).

It is noteworthy that the inhabitants of *Dārb al-Māhābeel* had long expressed their displeasure with the connotations of their street's name. The name carried a stigma that many believed reflected poorly on their community. In response, the Egyptian authorities sanctioned a renaming in 1951, adopting the designation *Sēkkēt el-Mānāsrā* or *Drāb el-Mānāsrā* (جبريل, 2017). Although the name of the street has been changed, a plaque inscribed with the street's earlier name, *Dārb al-Māhābeel*, still persists on the façade of one of its buildings (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3: Surviving plaque bearing the historic street name "*Dārb al-Māhābeel*".
(© Author).

6. Methodology

This paper critically explores the shared narratives associated with *Dārb al-Māhābeel* Street as an integral part of Cairo's intangible cultural heritage. Specifically, it seeks to examine the residents' perspectives, rituals, and everyday cultural practices, thereby elucidating how these lived experiences sustain and reproduce local identities. It also aspires to conduct a holistic account of the local community's traditions, collective memories, social identities, and cultural expressions.

This paper adopts a qualitative approach to comprehensively investigate the cultural landscape of the local community surrounding *Dārb al-Māhābeel* Street. Focus group interviews are employed to facilitate dynamic discussions, enabling local community members to share their lived experiences, cultural practices, and local traditions, while simultaneously uncovering the historical significance and shared narratives linked to the street. These discussions specifically address residents' perceptions and awareness regarding the street's nomenclature, historical evolution, collective memories, and the social and cultural functions of traditional beverages such as *Būḏa*.

Field visits to *Dārb al-Māhābeel* Street were carried out between May 2025 and July 2025. Participants were purposively sampled to encompass a diverse-cross section of the community, including residents, shop owners, workers, artisans, and elders, ensuring variation in age (ranging from 25 and 75), gender, and social roles. A total of five focus group sessions, comprising 37 individuals and consisting of 6 to 8 participants each, were held to gather a broad

spectrum of perspectives. Ten semi-structured interview questions were formulated to explore the shared narratives, cultural traditions, ritual practices, and perceptions concerning the street's historical and cultural significance. All sessions were audio-recorded with participants' consent, complemented by field notes capturing non-verbal cues and contextual details.

7. Findings and Discussion

7.1. Alternative Etymological Accounts of Dārb al-Māhābeel Street

The majority of the participants recalled that “*the street's original name was Tūrb al-Mānāsrā, a designation linked to the cemeteries that once occupied the site. Subsequently, the name was reportedly changed to Dārb al-Māhābeel due to the reputation of the street's Būza taverns, which attracted a clientele known for their inebriated and erratic behavior*”. However, it was also noted that in July 1951, the government formally reverted the name *Dārb al-Māhābeel* to *Drāb el-Mānāsrā*, in response to petitions from the local residents.

Despite official renaming initiatives, the participants reported that local usage has persisted, with residents continuously referring to it as *Dārb al-Māhābeel*. Accordingly, the street's traditional toponym endures not only in colloquial discourse but also within the physical landscape of the neighborhood, as evidenced by a surviving street plaque with the inscription “*Dārb al-Māhābeel*” still mounted on one of the buildings' facades (Fig. 4).



Fig. (4): The plaque of Dārb al-Māhābeel Street.
(© Author).

7.2. Stories and Historical Narratives Associated with the Name of Dārb al-Māhābeel Street

In response to the historical narratives associated with the name of *Dārb al-Māhābeel* street, five interpretive frameworks emerged, each predominantly accepted by different subsets of participants.

- 1) The most prevalent shared interpretation by elders links the name *Dārb al-Māhābeel* to the ancient *Būza* taverns. According to this account, patrons who consumed considerable quantities of the low-cost alcoholic drink would then stagger through the surrounding lanes, prompting bystanders to label them “madmen” (مهابيل). Over time, the epithet was transferred metonymically from the drinkers to the street itself, signaling an external critique of local social behavior.
- 2) A second narrative situates the name within a late-Ottoman anecdote. The participants recounted that “*a certain Pasha, identified as Shārīf, occupied a palace overlooking one of the street's Zār houses (بيوت الزار)—spaces associated with spirit-possession rituals and practices. Upon observing individuals engaged in these Zār rituals from his balcony, the Pasha purportedly exclaimed, “What are these crazy people?” (إيه الناس المهابيل دول؟!), and afterward this expression became embedded in the local vernacular, serving as the colloquial designation of the street*”.

- 3) A third, less frequently cited explanation traces the name to the *Māmlūk* period. The participants mentioned that *“ceremonial military parades traditionally traversed Dārb al-Māhābeel Street, during which soldiers rhythmically raised and lowered their arms in salute to the Wālī. Spectators, unfamiliar with the formal protocol, reportedly interpreted the synchronized movements as eccentric, subsequently associating the term Māhābeel with these soldiers and their movements. Consequently, the name Dārb al-Māhābeel became ingrained with the street in reference to these individuals”*.
- 4) According to several participants, the area once served as a cemetery where *Hāḍrāh* (ecstatic devotional gatherings) were convened to provide solace to the departed. They added that *“this practice is widespread and well-loved among the people, noting that within popular Egyptian belief, there’s a common maxim advises that “when the heart feels constricted, visit the grave” (إذا ضاقت الصدور فعليكم بزيارة القبور) , emphasizing the didactic value of contemplating mortality”*. They also pointed out that *“these funerary practices were unfamiliar to the Māmlūks, which led the street to be called Dārb al-Māhābeel, a name that carries a pejorative tone towards the visitors whose customs differ from the Māmlūk traditions”*. It is noteworthy that this maxim is folk wisdom rather than a verified *ḥādīth*; its function is to encourage reflection on the transient nature of worldly existence through the observation of the deceased.
- 5) A subset of participants attributed the street’s nomenclature to the historical visibility of residents perceived as cognitively impaired or socially marginal, colloquially labeled “fools,” “simpletons (مهابيل) . In this perspective, the community’s longstanding interactions with individuals considered mentally unwell became the defining socio-cultural marker that led to the street’s naming.

7.3. Local Community’s Awareness of the Etymological Origins of Dārb al-Māhābeel and its Shared Narratives

The majority of the participants demonstrated a comprehensive understanding of the etymological origins of the street’s name and its associated shared narratives, particularly those linked to the *Būza* taverns. This knowledge was predominantly observed among older residents; nonetheless, younger participants also reported that they learned the narratives associated with the nomenclature of *Dārb al-Māhābeel* street through intergenerational transmission, primarily from parents, grandparents, and other older relatives. Additionally, several respondents remarked that *“Dārb al-Māhābeel is among the most prominent streets in Cairo and has a significant presence within the Egyptian cultural memory, as evidenced by the fact that a well-known Egyptian film has even taken the street’s name as its title (فيلم درب المهابيل)”*

7. 4 Local Community Discontent with the Appellation “Dārb al-Māhābeel”

The findings indicate that the current residents do not perceive the appellation *Dārb al-Māhābeel* as a source of social stigma or personal annoyance, contrary to commonly held assumptions. They articulated that *“the name is primarily viewed as a historical artifact rather than a commentary on our own character or behavior”*. Additionally, it is interpreted as a

semantic vestige of Cairo's complex narrative, which is considered an audible expression of the city's layered, intangible cultural heritage.

Furthermore, some of the participants expressed a profound sense of pride towards *Dārb al-Māhābeel* Street, perceiving it as a living repository of historical memory and vernacular cultural practices that are integral to Egypt's national heritage. This sentiment was further bolstered by the street's literary prominence, as evidenced by Nobel laureate Naguib Mahfouz's acclaimed short story "*Dārb al-Māhābeel*", which they regarded as affirming the street's historical importance and cultural distinction.

In this context, the toponym functions less as a stigmatizing label and more as a cultural palimpsest that situates the neighborhood within a broader framework of folkloric memory. This perspective emphasizes the role of the name in reinforcing communal identity and safeguarding an element of Egypt's oral-historical patrimony, thereby contributing to a nuanced understanding of the neighborhood's cultural significance.

7.5 Modern Demographic Composition of Dārb al-Māhābeel Street

The older participants noted that "*the demographic profile of Dārb al-Māhābeel Street has witnessed a significant transformation throughout time*". However, the street was historically characterized by a multi-generational population; it is now principally inhabited by older residents, as many of their descendants have relocated to other areas. The younger adult residents are largely non-native to the neighborhood, having established residence there primarily due to proximity to their places of employment at *Dārb al-Māhābeel* Street. A significant segment of this younger demographic comprises individuals originating from other governorates or expatriates who have migrated to Cairo in search of employment opportunities.

7.6 Local Community's Familiarity with the Traditional Beverage Būza

Intergenerational differences are evident in residents' knowledge of the traditional beverage *Būza* within *Dārb al-Māhābeel* Street. The findings reveal a notable disparity in how different age groups acquire and perceive information regarding this traditional drink.

The elderly population possesses a profound, experiential understanding of *Būza*, rooted in personal history and cultural tradition. They described the beverage in terms of its authentic flavor and emphasized its cultural significance during holidays and special events like *Mūlids*, wedding celebrations, and social gatherings, thereby highlighting its role as a symbol of tradition and heritage.

Conversely, the younger generation's familiarity with *Būza* appears to be primarily shaped by popular culture. Most young individuals have neither tasted the beverage nor observed its preparation firsthand. Instead, their knowledge is largely derived from classic Egyptian cinema of the 1940s-1960s, where *Būza* frequently appeared in dramatic scenes set within well-known neighborhoods. Furthermore, their understanding of this traditional beverage is often mediated through media portrayals, which can sometimes lead to a conflation of historical facts and dramatic representation.

This discrepancy in knowledge highlights a significant break in cultural transmission. While the older generation possesses genuine, lived experiences of *Būza*, the younger generation's perceptions are mainly media-influenced. Such a gap raises concerns that traditional knowledge concerning the preparation, cultural significance, and ritualistic aspects of *Būza* may be at risk of being lost or distorted as it is transmitted across generations.

7.7 Presence and Persistence of *Būza* Taverns in *Dārb al-Māhābeel* Street

The participants confirmed that *“no physical traces of the former *Būza* taverns currently persist on *Dārb al-Māhābeel* Street; they have all disappeared”*. They noted that, *“despite Salafism's prohibition of alcohol in the late 19th century, at least three taverns were still operating here. By the 1990s, two of them had vanished completely and were replaced by electronics and mobile-phone stores”*.

The participants also revealed that *“there is still an informal *Būza* vendor, locally known as “*Bolbol*”, who works from a discreet location at the far end of the alley leading to *Bāb al-Khalq*”*. Unlike traditional *Būza* vendors who typically dispense *Būza* in *Qāraāh* (القرعة), a natural container made from half a pumpkin, which is cut open and hollowed out to be used as a drinking cup for *Būza*, this vendor packages the beverage in reused glass bottles.

According to the elder participants, *“this vendor is considered the successor to what was once the last dedicated *Būza* tavern in *Dārb al-Māhābeel*”*. This modest, single-story establishment served historically as a social hub for residents dressed in traditional cotton *gālābīyā*. Although the *gālābīyā* was once a prevalent garment among urban Cairenes, its daily use has markedly declined since the 1980s and has been replaced by trousers and synthetic sportswear. Today, sightseeing of men wearing the traditional *gālābīyā* has become rare, with occurrences largely confined to working-class neighborhoods such as *Dārb al-Ahmār*, *al-Jāmāliyyā*, *al-Ḥūsāynīyyā*, and parts of *Būlāq*. Nevertheless, the endurance of both the bottled- *Būza* practice and the *gālābīyā* thus serves as a micro-indicator of residual vernacular culture within rapidly transforming inner-city neighborhoods.

The participants added that *“the last licensed *Būza* tavern ceased operation since approximately 2018, when its owner fell seriously ill and could no longer able to manage daily production”*.

7.8 Local Community's Perception of the Evolution of *Dārb al-Māhābeel* Street Over the Years

Discussions with the local community along *Dārb al-Māhābeel* Street highlight an evolving urban landscape, where the architectural fabric has undergone significant transformation over time. Despite these changes, the street continues to retain its historic buildings and distinctive spatial character. Historically, the street was renowned for its numerous *Būza* taverns, which served as social centers and gathering spots for both visitors and residents. The participants noted that *“lately, new buildings have sprung up on the original plot and on the neighboring lots, and that's drastically reshaped the street's historic layout”*.

Furthermore, *Dārb al-Māhābeel* has been effectively integrated into the expanding commercial zone of the *‘Aṭābā* markets. Currently, the street is predominantly characterized by a proliferation of mobile-phone shops, electronics stores, print shops, showrooms, warehouses and local restaurants (Fig. 5).

This surge in commercial activities, alongside increased foot traffic and vehicular congestion, has nearly obliterated the traditional passageway and accelerated the disappearance of the traditional *Būza* taverns.



Fig. (5): The print shops and mobile stores that replaced *Būza* taverns at *Dārb al-Māhābeel* Street. (© Author).

Several older community members recalled that “the *Būza* taverns were living landmarks that carried out our street’s intangible cultural heritage”. They emphasized that “even though they were officially banned, they served as places where people mixed, told stories, and gathered cheaply and freely. Now that they’re gone, the neighborhood’s historical thread feels snapped, and our street’s unique character is fading fast. It’s a clear clash between today’s urban growth and protecting our local traditions”.

7.9 Local Community’s Perspectives on the Historical Identity, Social Cohesion, and Daily Practices of *Dārb al-Māhābeel* Amidst Recent Commercial Expansion

The focus group discussions with the local community provided valuable insights into their perceptions regarding the historical identity, social cohesion, and daily life practices associated with *Dārb al-Māhābeel* in the context of the recent surge of new commercial developments and businesses in the area. The majority of the older participants expressed that “the street doesn’t feel home anymore. We remember the old houses and the *Būza* taverns that brought everyone together—you’d always bump into neighbors and stop for a chat. We get nostalgic walking here. The modest low-rise buildings, the ornate balconies and wooden shutters, those Ottoman and Khedival details gave the place its soul. Replacing them with metal shutters and glass front feels like tearing a page out of our own history”. They also added that “without the narrow alleys, the carved balconies overhead, or even the scent of fermented *Būza*, how can the young generations picture what this street once was? Those were the markers of our stories, and now they’re gone”.



Fig. (6): The persistent movement of delivery trucks and motorcycles along Dārb al-Māhābeel Street. (© Author).

In addition, they remarked that the influx of non-resident shopkeepers and transient workers has resulted in a transformation of social interactions, shifting from extended, community-oriented exchanges to brief, transactional encounters. They recalled that *“we used to bring out chairs after dusk, pass around tea and roasted seeds, and talk until the call of the dawn prayer. We would celebrate Mūlids and other social and religious occasions. These simple rituals and practices kept us woven together. Now, the sidewalks clear out early, everyone disappears behind metal shutters, and the celebrations have gradually dwindled over time”*.

Some participants observed that stallholders and warehouse laborers have established their own support networks; however, these networks remain largely separate from the long-standing residential group, resulting in an increasingly fragmented local social structure. Intensified vehicles and pedestrian traffic have also lengthened commuting times, hindered emergency access, and virtually eliminated the possibility of traditional street-based children’s games and activities. Furthermore, elderly residents expressed feelings of physical marginalization due to the constant flow of delivery trucks and motorcycles (Fig. 6).

7.10 Rituals and Cultural Practices Maintained by Local Inhabitants or External Visitors Linked to the Street’s Historical Heritage

The participants indicated that the ritualistic dimensions and cultural practices associated with Dārb al-Māhābeel Street have experienced substantial attrition across successive generations. Neither contemporary residents nor visitors engage in any of the traditional observance or sociocultural practices previously documented in ethnographic literature, including *Hāḍrāh* (ecstatic devotional gatherings), *Zār*, and communal *Būza*-sharing and consumption rituals. What remains of the street’s tangible heritage is limited to a single weathered street plaque bearing the inscription “Dārb al-Māhābeel” affixed to the façade of one surviving Ottoman-era structure.

With regard to intangible heritage, continuity is sustained mainly through oral transmission tradition. Elder community members recount carefully curated narratives that emphasize the street’s cultural and historical significance, consciously seeking to instill these memories in younger generations.

8. Conclusions

Undoubtedly, Cairo's streets serve as living testimonies to both tangible and intangible cultural heritage. They bear witness to significant historical events, social practices, religious rituals, and daily life routines that have contributed to their nomenclature and communal identity over time. *Dārb al-Māhābeel* exemplifies how a street name can function as a significant repository for preserving collective memory and intangible cultural heritage practices. It acts as a tangible connection to the past, persistently reminding local inhabitants and external visitors of its integral role in shaping Cairo's social, cultural, and historical fabric.

Although many of the original cultural practices and rituals associated with *Dārb al-Māhābeel* Street—such as *Būza*, *Hāḍrāh*, and *Zār*—no longer exist, its name remains a potent symbol capable of evoking collective memories and reinforcing cultural identities. The sustained use of the designation "*Dārb al-Māhābeel*" reflects the community's resilience and their inclination to preserve a sense of continuity, despite potential shifts or stigmatization of the street's historical context. This phenomenon illustrates how a street name can transcend its original meaning to embody a broader cultural memory, serving as an enduring emblem of local identity. Recognizing and valuing such place names enables communities to honor their history and safeguard intangible heritage practices for future generations, even when the original rituals or customs have faded.

The case of *Dārb al-Māhābeel* Street further underscores the vital role of elders as custodians of cultural heritage. They transmit the street's micro-history to younger generations through oral histories, personal stories, shared narratives, and embodied practices, thereby preventing the cultural amnesia often associated with rapid urban development. Egyptian cinema likewise functions as an auxiliary repository of intangible cultural heritage. Within this context, the street's folklore is rendered into a nationally accessible visual narrative, helping to preserve and reinforce fleeting rituals and social dynamics. Such cinematic representation extends their historiographical importance, ensuring their recognition and remembrance within the broader cultural memory.

In essence, *Dārb al-Māhābeel* Street stands as a testament to the power of community memory and shared narratives in shaping and preserving cultural heritage. It illustrates how urban topography, intertwined with social narratives and collective memories, can preserve the intangible aspects of cultural identity. To ensure the enduring vitality of these essential heritage aspects, sustainable safeguarding strategies must employ a multidisciplinary approach—integrating archival research, ethnography, film studies, and participatory planning—so that Cairo's streets and alleyways remain not merely sites of nostalgia but active reservoirs of cultural creativity for future generations.

9. Recommendations

- Promoting a systematic study of urban toponyms (place names) within the framework of cultural heritage research. This approach would serve as a means of tracing historical narratives, socio-religious practices, and community transformations that are integrated into Cairo's urban fabric. In this context, installing a commemorative plaque at *Dārb al-Māhābeel* Street is recommended to clarify the historical significance and origins of its name. This

initiative serves to enhance cultural awareness and preserve the collective memory and cultural identity of the local community by providing a tangible link to its historical roots. Furthermore, providing an informative inscription would function as an educational tool for residents and visitors alike about the street's historical context and the reasons behind its naming.

- Recognizing *Būḏa* as a key element of *Dārb al-Māhābeel*'s cultural identity and social practice, while also acknowledging its contemporary decline. Documenting its production, consumption contexts, and associated narratives, including its historical links to the street's nomenclature, would facilitate the preservation of the local community's embodied knowledge and memory, which are integral to understanding the socio-cultural dynamics that have historically shaped the area.
- Supporting initiatives that involve elders and other community members in collecting oral histories, personal narratives, and shared memories related to the street's past practices and social rituals such as *Būḏa*, *Hāḏrāh*, and *Zār*. These participatory projects are essential for documenting micro-histories, ensuring that intangible heritage remains alive through storytelling and embodied practices, thus preventing cultural amnesia amid rapid urban transformation.
- Valorizing the role of elders at *Dārb al-Māhābeel* Street as vital cultural custodians of local cultural heritage. Promoting sustained intergenerational dialogue through their active engagement can significantly contribute to the safeguarding of the street's intangible cultural heritage. Documenting and amplifying their oral histories, practices, and place-based knowledge would support the preservation of the community's collective memory within heritage and urban planning frameworks.
- Encouraging community-led education and cultural activities such as workshops, festivals, exhibitions, and programs that actively engage residents and youth in exploring the histories, rituals, and social practices associated with the street, including *Būḏa*, *Hāḏrāh* and *Zār*. The public recognition and articulation of the meanings embedded in *Dārb al-Māhābeel* Street's name can reinforce a sense of belonging and foster collective responsibility for safeguarding shared traditions, practices, and rituals.
- Addressing the challenges posed by the rapid urbanization along *Dārb al-Māhābeel* Street by implementing an integrated heritage-sensitive urban management framework that balances development with the preservation of tangible and intangible cultural assets. Moreover, the incorporation of cultural heritage impact assessments can serve to mitigate the erasure of *Dārb al-Māhābeel* historical identity and sustain the cultural integrity of urban neighborhoods.
- Promoting multidisciplinary and collaborative research that combines ethnography, archival studies, oral history, film analysis, and participatory urban planning can enhance understanding of how street names serve as repositories of cultural memory. These approaches deepen insights into their historical, social, and symbolic significance, thereby supporting the development of comprehensive and resilient preservation strategies.
- Developing long-term sustainable heritage strategies that safeguard both tangible and intangible aspects of *Dārb al-Māhābeel*'s urban cultural heritage. These strategies should

aim to maintain the vibrancy of cultural practices, social and religious rituals, and collective memories, ensuring that Cairo's streets remain active sites of cultural identity rather than passive remnants of the past.

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إستكشاف الروايات المشتركة والتراث الحي لمصر من خلال تسميات الشوارع: دراسة حالة لشارع درب المهابيل، القاهرة التاريخية

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الملخص العربي

يتميز النسيج الحضري النابض بالحياة في القاهرة بتراثه الثقافي المادي وغير المادي المتنوع وعميق الجذور، حيث تجسد كل منطقة قصصاً فريدة تعكس التاريخ المحلي والتقاليد والممارسات المجتمعية. ويجسد شارع درب المهابيل في القاهرة التاريخية هذه الظاهرة بإعتباره مكاناً تلتقي فيه الممارسات اليومية والروايات الشفوية والتراث المعماري لتشكل هوية ثقافية مميزة. تبحث هذه الورقة البحثية في درب المهابيل بإعتباره مكوناً حيوياً من مكونات التراث الثقافي المادي للقاهرة، مع التركيز على الروايات المشتركة للمجتمع المرتبطة بالشارع وإستكشاف أصول إسمه. وتسلط هذه الورقة الضوء بشكل خاص على التقاليد والممارسات الرئيسية التي يحافظ عليها سكان وزوار شارع درب المهابيل بما في ذلك مشروب البوظة التقليدي، الذي كان بمثابة سمة ثقافية مرتبطة بالتفاعلات الاجتماعية الخاصة بالشارع.

تستخدم هذه الورقة البحثية المنهجية النوعية وذلك من خلال المقابلات الجماعية مع أفراد المجتمع المحلي حيث تهدف هذه المقابلات إلى إستكشاف الذكريات الجماعية، وتصورات تطور الشارع، والطقوس والممارسات الدائمة المرتبطة بإرثه التاريخي. تكشف النتائج أن معظم الممارسات الثقافية والاجتماعية الأصلية، بما في ذلك حانات البوظة التي كانت سائدة في الماضي، قد تضاءلت بشكل كبير في السنوات الأخيرة، ولم يبق منها سوى لافتة الشارع كعلامة ملموسة على هويتها الثقافية. وعلى الرغم من ذلك، لا يزال الإسم الجغرافي بمثابة وعاء للذاكرة الجماعية مع الحفاظ على الصلة الرمزية بالأهمية التاريخية للشارع. علاوة على ذلك، يبرز كبار السن في الحي كأوصياء رئيسيين علي التراث الثقافي الخاص بالشارع، حيث يلعبون دوراً حيوياً في نقل التاريخ المصغر والروايات المجتمعية إلى الأجيال الشابة. هذا بالإضافة إلي انه تساهم هذه الورقة البحثية في فهم أوسع للمساحات الحضرية بإعتبارها مستودعات للذاكرة الجماعية كما أنها تؤكد على أهمية الحفاظ على التراث الثقافي غير المادي من خلال المشاركة المجتمعية النشطة وزيادة الوعي التاريخي.

الكلمات الدالة: درب المهابيل، التراث الثقافي غير المادي، الروايات المشتركة، المجتمع الحي، البوظة، الحياة الاجتماعية، الذاكرة الجماعية، الهوية الثقافية.