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Consumerism

The Growth of Arab Consumer Cultures since the 1970s

In the past fifty years the Arab world has seen the increasing inroads of the Western model of mass consumer culture, to a degree that disturbs urban intellectuals. Egyptian historian Abdel-Wahhab al-Messiri told Abu Dhabi's *Mubdi'un* (*Creative People*) program that the West has become a monstrous consumer culture based on "Darwinist modernity which is against God, nature and the human being" (Abu Dhabi TV, June 2002). Writers argue that, as in the West, many aspects of life in the Arab world have been transformed into a commodity in today's market system and and globalization has only made this worse. Whether they are problematic land crossings, with cars overladen with clothes, electric appliances, and food, or airports with droves of air travelers, national borders see huge amounts of consumer goods transported for the sake of getting a bargain. Satellite television, shopping malls, the Internet—all have fed a consumer frenzy that shows no sign of letting up, even while economies shrink. The mobile phone has become the symbol of the new age, both glorified and lampooned in soap operas and TV ads as the ultimate sign of having made it in the merciless scramble to escape poverty and acquire the stuff of success. In some countries like Syria, security agencies were hesitant about introducing them at all, and Saudi Arabia's religious police are fretting that new digital camera technology in mobiles offers young people another means for surreptitious flirting in shopping malls. The dichotomies this accentuates are there for all to see: from the affluent Nile-side chic of Cairo's World Trade Center, Arcadia Mall, or glitzy new Conrad Hotel, one can look out onto the teeming, poor district of Bulaq al-Dakrour—scenes of wealth next to poverty that are repeated around the region, but at their starkest in Cairo. Poverty itself has been commodified. In Arabpop video clips, the poor are the backdrop for the shenanigans of the stars. In Egyptian singer Shaimaa Said's 2003 song *Khadny* (*He Took Me*), she and her boyfriend take a four-wheel drive to the desert outside Cairo. When he storms off after an argument, she returns on a donkey cart driven by an elderly peasant couple, lying among

Crowds in a Cairo market street. (Norbert Schiller/Focus MidEast)

the tomato crates in an elaborate dress and full makeup—a scenario that is almost impossible to imagine in real life.

Whole sections of Arab cities are monuments to a new consumer age. Dubai made an independent decision in the 1970s not only to Westernize but also to globalize; it invited nationals of the world to live and consume as they would at home, as long as they kept non-Islamic religious observance out of sight. The American military presence in the Gulf after the 1991 war, though largest in Saudi Arabia, had more of a social effect in Kuwait than anywhere else. Saudi Arabia was already a Westernized society with strong links to the United States and a well-entrenched consumer culture, where Western brand names were common. Kuwait also became Westernized when U.S. troops were in town, and their presence was all the more obvious in the tiny state, while most Saudis hardly felt the presence of the military in their midst. Kuwait City looks like an American city, with American cafes and restaurants and, since just before the third Gulf war, a Virgin music store.

Beirut's downtown area, destroyed by the civil war, has been quickly revamped, but critics say the renewal lacks soul. What remained of elegant, European, colonial-era buildings and medieval souks was swept away, resulting in a spotless, reconstructed city center, where businesses relocate but where there is little warmth or surge of humanity except for overpriced boutiques, bars, and cafes that fill up in the evenings. What was a bustling city center gutted by war has become something akin to London's commercial district, the City. Beirutis even refer to the area as Solidere, the name of the company set up by Prime

Downtown Beirut. (Alison Wright/Corbis)

Minister Rafik Hariri to implement the project in 1992. According to Samir Khalaf in his 2002 study *Civil and Uncivil Violence in Lebanon*, the juxtaposition of neon restaurants and bars with empty-shell buildings, which invite speculators anticipating another boom, does no good for the psyche of a society recovering from war and disintegration, reinforcing a public mood of lethargy and disengagement. Urban redevelopment on a smaller scale is taking place in Cairo, where the commercial district in central Cairo has been pedestrianized with quaint period-piece lampposts, and plans are afoot to do the same to the heart of the original Islamic city of Cairo, the al-Azhar area, which is crammed with markets, artisans, mosques, cafes, and a labyrinth of alleyways. Property prices are expected to rocket as more businesses move in. Some are already there, such as a fashionable interior design shop called al-Khatoun, which forms a model for the kind of aesthetically pleasing trendy business that the revamped district seeks to attract.

Many worry it could all go too far. Only a court order stopped Egypt's ministry of culture from allowing the construction of a five-star hotel inside the grounds of the Citadel. Critics, many of them foreign residents, say the underlying concept is to create a kind of voyeuristic timepiece for tourists to gawk at—something like the original London Crystal Palace Exhibition of 1850, except with real people living real lives. Ironically, from the nineteenth century up to the 1970s, sections of this large district were notorious as drug dens. Known as al-Batniya, it was immortalized as such in novels by Naguib Mahfouz. In the 1970s the film *al-Batniya*, which was

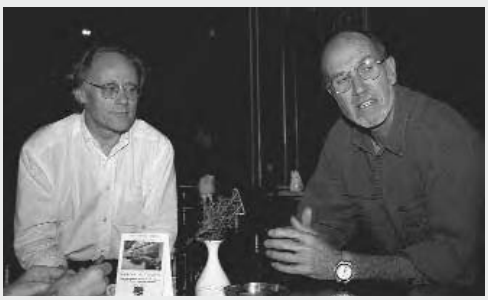
"Employing the Antiquities": "Pyramidiots" Beat Egypt at Its Own Game

Egypt's pyramids at Giza are the main attraction of its tourism industry and one of the country's key sources of revenue. (TRIP/Art Directors)

Egypt's ancient history adds up to big money, both for the state, which employs antiquities in its quest to derive tourist revenue, and for writers with newfangled ideas about their origins. Two authors have questioned conventional theory on the origins of the pyramids and ancient Egyptian civilization, enraging the Egyptology community around the world with best-selling books in Europe and America. Graham Hancock is the better known, via a string of titles that, as Britain's *The Guardian* newspaper says, have created a new literary genre of pop alternative history. The Scottish writer's "breakthrough to bestseller status," as his Web site (www.grahamhancock.com) says, came in 1992 with the publication of *The Sign and the Seal,* which tried to put flesh on the biblical story of the Ark of the Covenant. His foray into pyramidery began in 1995 with *Fingerprints of the Gods,* which has now sold more than three million copies. Then in 1997 he put out in the United States *Keeper of Genesis: The Message of the Sphinx,* with coauthor Robert Bauval. Their central thesis is that Egyptology's consensus on the age of the Giza Pyramids is suspect and that the conventional figure of 4,500 years may be incorrect. "We are arguing that here are two scientific tools, astronomy and geology, against a rather dubious chronological system. As controversial as they may be, I'd rather look at these astronomical and geological arguments," Bauval said (interview with author, *Cairo Times,* 13 January 2000). Bauval realized that the positioning of Giza's three pyramids in a line and at an angle to the Nile River mirrors the three stars in the "belt" of the constellation Orion—as if ancients had consecrated the site according to the pattern of the night sky as they looked south toward Orion. But, according to star charts, that must have been 12,500 years ago. "When you

investigate this site from an astronomical point of view, whether you like it or not, it spells out the date of 10,500 B.C.," Bauval said.

The pair have hinted at weirder things in their books, such as that there are unexplained pyramid-like structures on Mars and that the American space agency NASA has an "X-Files" determination to keep a lid on this fact (see *The Mars Mystery*). Zahi Hawass, an Egyptian Egyptologist and current head of the Supreme Council for Antiquities, has ferociously attacked Bauval, Hancock, and other alternative theorists as "pyramidiots." After much media scrutiny and academic criticism, they are now jettisoning the wackier stuff. "It was more an excursion into a different area of inquiry," Hancock said of the Mars idea. They may have been off the mark with some things, he argues, but they have succeeded in riling a secretive and elitist Egyptology community who are blocking new thinking on ancient Egypt. "Because of the overwhelming scientific ethic in Egyptology, we think the Egyptologists have blinded themselves to the true character of ancient Egyptian civilization. Because in our time people build gigantic structures to satisfy their own ego, because they're megalomaniacs, there's a feeling that the only reason why gigantic structures could have been built was to satisfy the egos of the pharaohs. But when you analyze this closely, you find that it's simply an opinion on the part of Egyptologists, with nothing to substantiate it," Hancock said (interview with author, *Cairo Times,* 13 January 2000). Adds Bauval: "We have a problem. We start off in the Third and Fourth Dynasty with a fully blown culture, ready-made, with hieroglyphic texts, with the pyramids, with the knowledge and technology to raise monuments. Egyptologists will come and argue that there has been a process of development—which usually entails looking at the *mastaba* [stone-slab tomb] as a precursor to the pyramid. It's rubbish, I can tell you that. I'm a construction engineer, and you don't go from the *mastaba* to these kinds of monuments in a matter of one or two centuries. It makes more sense to see a much longer process of development than this simplistic view that is being given."



Graham Hancock (left) and Robert Bauval (right), the writers who popularized Egyptology with their books about the pyramids, but whom some experts attacked as "the pyramidiots." (Claude Stemmelin)

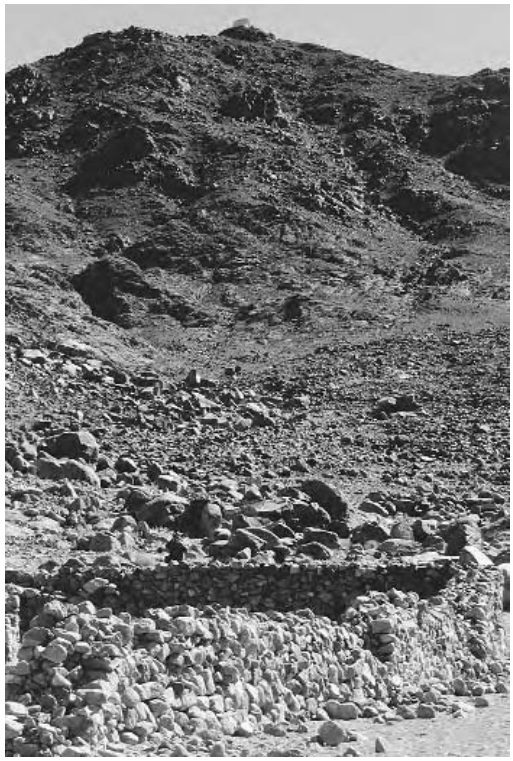
The Pyramids of Giza in Cairo, Egypt. (Vanni Archive/Corbis)

based on a Mahfouz novel, depicted the district in all its harshness, and as a result Sadat's wife Jihan launched a project to clean up the area. Restoration work in al-Batniya has stirred huge debate, with fears that the ministry of culture wants to turn old mosques into the Wahhabi-style, plain-marble structures of Saudi Arabia. The ministry thinks tourists prefer to see pristine, restored buildings rather than monuments that show their antiquity. It also argues that mosques should be fit for use as contemporary places of worship and not simply exist as historic buildings. Damascus has seen similar controversy over restoration work and the inexorable advance of concrete apartment blocks. Unlike in Cairo, most of Damascus's old buildings that once housed Turkish baths and caravanserai remain intact. The United Nations cultural organization UNESCO has named Damascus a world cultural heritage site, and in the 1970s Syria passed laws banning demolition inside the walls of the ancient city (though about two-thirds of historic buildings lie outside its walls).

Both new money and old money seek to separate themselves from the consuming masses through membership in elite groups and organizations, such as Algiers's Snobar Club and Egypt's Marina tourist area, both on the Mediterranean. Since the mid-1990s, Egypt has seen the sprouting of exclusive housing estates in empty, semidesert areas around the crowded capital, selling dreams of Americana with names like Beverly Hills, Palm Hills, and Dreamland. Even the holy month of Ramadan hasn't been saved. The traditional Ramadan lantern has been appropriated by rising commercialism as a symbol of the month-long festival of conspicuous consumption and festivity, in the same manner that the pine tree has come to represent the Western Christmas. Egypt has

Lovers steal a private moment by the Nile River. The river flows through Cairo, a dusty and overcrowded city. (Norbert Schiller/Focus MidEast)

led the way in commercializing Ramadan. Businessmen sponsor so-called mercy tables that offer free food at sunset to the poor or anyone else on the streets. Sometimes the food servers wear T-shirts with the name of the businessman who sponsored the meals. Some businessmen sponsor these meals to promote themselves in districts where they seek election in parliamentary polls. "Although the history of social responsibility in Egypt has always known a degree of conspicuous consumption and self-interest like this, it wasn't the predominant trend unlike today. Help from the privileged to the needy was done more in private than public, unlike what we see today in the Ramadan mercy tables," wrote political analyst Wahid Abdel-Meguid (*al-Hayat*, 3 December 2002). Governments have to stock up on sugar and wheat supplies in advance of the orgy of consumption that runs from dusk to dawn over twenty-eight days. Sales of dried fruit, nuts, and sweets skyrocket, as do hours of TV-watching. Advertising increases as consumerism adopts, molds, and expands the customs attached to the month. A barrage of television ads come before, during, and after prime-time soap operas, offering cash prizes for callers who correctly predict the outcome of the plots. The calls cost a fortune, and clerics have attacked the schemes as a form of gambling. Since the meltdown in Southeast Asia and political violence in the Middle East, many companies have invested heavily in spending on Ramadan. State-of-the-art, high-tech ads plug fancy hotel and tourist complexes, but they fail to mention where these hotels are, or that they are not yet built: the idea is to give banks an impression of success in order to secure loans. When Muslims break their daily fast during the holy month of Ramadan, dates are a part of every *iftar* meal. Now dates come in myriad shapes and sizes and are sold with appealing names—the titles of classical Arabic songs, or even "Osama bin Laden," as in Cairo's markets in November 2001. Muslim tradition says the Prophet himself broke his fast with dates and water, so that's what millions of Arabs do. At the same time, Ramadan offers a chance for mass cultural reaffirmation in the face of the stream of foreign values perceived to be swamping Arab life during the rest of the year. Some state televisions take many foreign (non-Arab) pop videos and films off the air for the duration of the month.



Mount Sinai in Egypt, a tourist attraction in the wilderness of the Sinai where St. Catherine's Monastery is located. (TRIP/Art Directors)

The march of mass consumerism in the twentieth century has helped change the rural landscape: in countries with large

The Battle to Preserve the Past in Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia is struggling to preserve pockets of ancient architecture threatened by the relentless onslaught of modern construction. The rush to modernity has rendered old traditions in urban areas almost obsolete, such as in the Hejaz cities on the West Coast. Most of the country has been rebuilt after sudden oil wealth filled state coffers in the 1970s. In the face of that flood, the ancient Hejaz cities of Jeddah, Mecca, and Medina are struggling to save their unique heritage. In extreme cases, old towns built on ancient oases, such as Khaibar and al-Ula, with their labyrinthine alleys and mud-brick, palm-roofed homes, stand abandoned after residents moved to adjacent new communities in the 1970s. "It was a fashion to leave the old houses after the oil boom. People were moving all the way up to the late 1980s. Laborers moved into some [houses] as tenants, others were abandoned, and some fell down," said Sami Nawwar, the head of a government project to renovate Jeddah's old quarters (interview with author, April 2003).

Architecture in Jeddah is part of a tradition in the Red Sea region, which encompasses the Egyptian and Sudan coast on the west side and Yemen to the south of the Hejaz. Buildings lie in narrow alleys running north-south and east-west in order to utilize sea winds, but their walls along the alleyways jut out at angles to create shadows that lessen the effects of summer heat and sun. The houses are also constructed with large stone slabs to provide natural air-conditioning. Buildings have wooden balcony structures called *roshans,* with intricate woodwork (called *manqour* in the Hejaz and *mashrabiya* in Egypt), which gives mottled shade on the inside and protects the women from the view of outsiders. But no one is interested in this form of architecture anymore. It's expensive and doesn't meet the needs of a booming population, and developers are swamping Saudi cities with pristine apartment blocks and villas. "We eat from a freezer, we live in a freezer, we write in a freezer, we ride in a freezer," laments Jeddan architect Sami Angawi, who has built a stunning villa mixing old Hejazi and new styles (interview with author, Reuters, 22 April 2003). The house has an austere, well-protected view of a castle on the outside, giving way to an open interior where four stories of rooms surround a central courtyard flooded by natural light from a glass ceiling. "Islamic civilization is all about balance and we have to rediscover that. Architecture is a reflection of society and is its outer expression," he said.

Traditional architecture stands among modern buildings in the Saudi coastal city of Jeddah where the kingdom's strict customs are more relaxed. (Scott Peterson/Liaison/Getty Images)

Old buildings in Mecca are currently set for demolition as part of plans to increase the city's

A sign directing potential customers to an American fast-food restaurant competes for attention on the skyline with a local mosque in Amman, Jordan. (Norbert Schiller/Focus MidEast)

ability to absorb pilgrims in the hajj season, when some two million Muslims converge there. Previous renovations to expand the central mosque have resulted in the demolition of Mecca's old district, and American fast-food restaurants, commercial towers, and luxury hotels have taken their place. "Mecca and Medina are the most disturbed cities in the world in every sense. They are totally out of balance. New buildings are coming up and the skyline of Mecca will be like the skyline of New York," Angawi said (interview with author, Reuters, 22 April 2003). The key to understanding why the Saudi authorities engage in this activity, Angawi contends, is the tribal and fundamentalist ethos of the state. Ancient shrines are viewed with suspicion because ordinary folk come to venerate deceased holy figures. In Wahhabi ideology, this practice is tantamount to a perversion of the central, monotheistic message of Islam. Religious police have acted in tandem with the ministry of religious affairs to demolish places where locals believe the Prophet prayed, lived, or visited. Angawi claims to have excavated in the early 1990s what he thinks was the Prophet's home in Mecca. The authorities wanted to hush up the discovery to avoid a rush of pilgrims to the site, he said.

There is at least a national debate about these issues now. According to mainstream religious thinking, those lobbying for the preservation of religious sites were motivated by "devilish thoughts brought on by hopeless emotion," in the words of religious scholar Sheikh Saleh al-Haseen. Haseen wrote in a daily paper that "Islamic legal scholars have never talked about 'reviving monuments' in Mecca, except those God approved of: the Great Mosque and others which are part of pilgrimage rites. Neither the Prophet's companions nor anyone who came after them used to visit the alleged birthplace of the Prophet, because the Prophet didn't tell them to" (*al-Madina,* March 2003).

peasant populations, villagers in regular contact with big cities have accumulated and amassed goods. With nation-states groaning from population growth, manners are not what they used to be, simply because of the crush of people one has to deal with in everyday life. Today's Arab societies loudly proclaim the need to hold on to traditions in the face of an increasingly interconnected world that threatens to smother old, unique ways. In the last fifty years, these communities have gone through unprecedented change, more than at any other period in history and at a pace

A billboard advertises perfume. (Barry Iverson/Time Life Pictures/Getty Images)

that seems to have left society confused and running to catch up. Amman and Riyadh have been transformed from small Bedouin communities into expanding modern cities. Saudi novelist Abdel-Rahman Munif (who died in January 2004 in Damascus) even had his passport revoked for critiquing the country's overnight move from rough desert living to air-conditioned urban heaven in his series, *Cities of Salt*.

In Egypt, the biggest country, people are wondering, to quote the title of a recent book by economist Galal Amin, "whatever happened to the Egyptians?" (Amin 2001). Other Arabs marvel at the proportions of life in Egypt today. Viewed through the lens of Egypt's ubiquitous soap operas, people from Bahrain to Tripoli wonder how Cairenes manage to live in their choking metropolis. Were it not for UNESCO intervention to stop a ring-road in their midst, the pyramids today would stand in the middle of a Cairo slum district. As it is, the sphinx faces fast-food restaurants, and the neighborhood of Nazlat al-Saman is only several dozen meters away. In a city whose population of at least 12 million rises to more than 16 million each working day due to commuters, a half million people live in an old tomb complex dubbed "the city of the dead," and one group of Christian migrants from the south live amidst the city's garbage, which they collect to make a living. Known as the *zabbaleen*, some of them are extremely wealthy despite appearances. Nearby, the elite resort community of Katamiya Heights is charging around $165 for a round of golf on reclaimed desert land. Cognizant of the changes wrought upon them, Egyptians today experience nostalgia, even for the not-so-distant time before the republic came into being in 1952. The old, landed gentry is still around, though in fewer numbers and with less visibility: one of the aims of Nasser's revolutionary government was to end their domination of Egyptian society. Dramas featuring fez-wearing pashas and courtly ladies in regal villas now fill the television screens, though the tradition of wearing a fez has yet to make a comeback. It is still worn by some men in Tunisia and Libya. Cairo's old elites—now a minority in a city originally built for three million but now swamped by rural migrants and their ways—fret over the changes in Egyptian life. "The Bedouin are being settled, the Nile bridged and dammed, and the ancient songs and stories are being forgotten," wrote Tori Haring-Smith in *Colors of Enchantment: Theater, Dance, Music, and the Visual Arts of the Middle East* (Zuhur

In a period of three decades Dubai has transformed itself into a modern city of skyscrapers. (Ludovic Maisant/Corbis)

2002). If it wasn't for Hassan Geretly's troupe, traditional theater would have died with its last practitioners. Similarly, realizing that an entire musical heritage is in danger of being lost, a few Egyptians are trying to recover old recordings stored by individuals and institutes in order to preserve dead forms that had lasted for centuries, such as the *zaffat al-arousa* wedding song (according to researcher Heba Farid, interview with author, June 2003).

Aware that the global context places a premium on local cultures, governments are offering up their countries as objects for consumption. Egypt and Tunisia heavily promote themselves as destinations for mass Western tourism, attempting to turn themselves into Gulf-style rentier states, but seeking rents from tourism instead of oil. Egypt and Morocco have been traditional favorites for wealthy Saudis, with the royal family having a penchant for Morocco in particular. Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan are going more for the cultural tourism market. Wealthy Gulf states like Qatar and Dubai, and even Saudi Arabia, want to attract tourists too. Mecca now has an exclusive hotel called Burj Zamzam—towering over the central mosque and heavily advertised on al-Arabiya—where you pay the world for a view of the *Kaaba*. Dubai, already a major tourist and financial center, has embarked on a spree of hotel construction, and the barren peninsula of Qatar, trying to catch up with its savvy Gulf cousin, is promoting itself on CNN as "once seen, never forgotten" and "preserved for you." Luxury golf courses and other five-star sports facilities set the standard for the ambitions of these Gulf states.

A fourth tier of countries like Oman and Sudan are carefully planning to attract niche markets of tourists through marketing cultural diversity. "The world is developing an interest in Sudan. We have 580 tribes and 120 dialects, all intercommunicating in the Arabic language. This cultural diversity is an attraction," said minister of state for culture and tourism Siddiq Mujtaba (interview with author, Reuters, 22 August 2002). "But we want tourism with our own values. The government does not compromise between social values and economic objectives of the country: then you are losing because you are not marketing your nation or your heritage. Our country has its own traditions. There are millions of tourists per year in Iran, where they don't have wine or the other things of Western tourism—we don't want drunken tourists." The Arabic word for tourism, *siyaha*, has the connotation in Sudan of a traveling sheikh who spreads Islam through his piety. The country has a lot to offer: Sudan boasts one of the most stunning coral reefs in the world, off the east coast near the town of Port Sudan, as well as the unique Nubian culture of the north. Sudan is betting that an end to the civil war will bring in tourist money. Since September 11, when wealthy Gulf Arabs began to feel unwelcome in the West, inter-Arab tourism has picked up, and Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, and Syria all hope for a new influx of Arab tourists.

The Growth of Arab Advertising since the 1990s

In terms of global standards, the advertising industry is still underdeveloped, but that doesn't mean there's not much advertising. On the contrary, in many countries advertisements bombard the consumer at every turn, with billboards, TV commercials, and soap operas that slip into ad breaks so that the viewer hardly notices. Despite the economic and political problems plaguing the region at present, advertising markets are set to grow in the coming years. Israel's total annual spending on advertising is over one billion dollars, which is only matched by Saudi Arabia's expenditures. Arab advertisers count all advertising spent on the pan-Arab satellite channels, such as al-Jazeera, al-Arabiya, and MBC, in the total annual spending figures for Saudi Arabia, since the vast majority of advertisers on these channels are aiming at the Saudi television audience, where there is about 70 percent satellite penetration among a population of over 20 million. This population has far higher per capita spending power than Egypt, where, despite a population three times larger than Saudi Arabia, per capita income is lower and annual spending on advertising is roughly half that of the kingdom. Alongside Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Lebanon are the most sophisticated advertising markets, with globalized promotion values and a style of execution that in Lebanon are generally not censored for political or sexual content. In Saudi Arabia, advertisers must blur human faces on billboards, because the religious establishment views that showing the human form is *haram*. There have been instances of banning images of tea being passed with the left hand, the hand traditionally reserved for the toilet (Karim Younes of Starcom, interview with author, April 2003). Yet in all three of these countries, the industry is left largely to its own devices. In socialist hangover states like Egypt and Syria, on the other hand, government bodies dominate the in-

Cigarettes Big in the Arab World

Hardly an Arabic film exists without a chain-smoking lead character, whose tobacco habit is presented as an intrinsic part of his or her attractiveness to the viewer. Directors argue that they are only reflecting real life, but antismoking campaigners say the movies are exaggerating, distorting, and encouraging the habit. In most countries television can't advertise cigarettes, while print media can, but the indirect advertising of films and soaps heavily undercuts these restrictions. Egypt has the region's largest number of smokers, at least 12 million smokers out of a population of 70 million. Campaigners consider that *shisha* (narghile, or flavored tobacco smoked through a water-filtered pipe) has become a new epidemic in the region, and one that is popular with middle-class young women in Cairo, Amman, Damascus, and Beirut. Traditionally, the most *shisha* a woman would smoke would be a few puffs to prepare the pipe for her husband. "Nowadays they'd smoke the whole lot," said World Health Organization official Fatima al-Awwa (interview with author, December 2001). Religious authorities in Saudi Arabia and Egypt have begun to speak out against smoking. In 2001 Saudi Arabia declared Mecca and Medina, sites of Islam's holiest shrines, as "tobacco-free zones." Hundreds of thousands of pilgrims will return home from these sites having seen antismoking messages. Egypt's highest religious authorities have issued fatwas saying smoking is Islamically forbidden. Governments are also acting, banning smoking in many public buildings, though Egypt's government is hampered by the fact that it owns the country's main tobacco manufacturer, whose virtual monopoly ensures regular profits.

dustry. Social customs that see everyone copying whatever is seen as successful have led to a whole generation in Egypt that sells products with dancing girls bopping to Arabpop jingles. This style has traveled to most other Arab television, creating what advertising moguls call a "jingle jungle." In Egypt during Ramadan, the viewer will see ad-industry guru Tarek Nour, whose Americana has dominated the sector for three decades, selling TVs, fridges, mobile phones, luxury flats, and fizzy drinks, plus asking viewers to donate money to kids with cancer, all within the space of ten minutes.

But the spread of satellites showing foreign ads means viewers are beginning to know and appreciate a good ad when they see one. Plus, multinational companies have moved into the region and have used expertise found mainly in Lebanon and the Gulf to bring advertising standards more in line with global norms. Up until a few years ago, ads in the Gulf were thought up by Lebanese, Pakistani, Indian, and Filipino expats, who might also star in them, and many ads were simply foreign versions with Arabic dubbing. Now you see men in dishdashas (white robe worn in the Gulf) and women in headscarves all the time as part of a trend of specialization in the Arab region. As trade barriers slowly come down, local services and industries that perhaps never advertised before are having to get in on the act to fight competition from abroad. In Egypt, mobile phone and cola wars are being fought with huge sums of money shelled out to pop stars and actors to plug products. The International Advertising Association held its annual confer-

ence of 2002 in Lebanon. But as a sign of the intellectual scorn that consumerism still provokes, Jordanian columnists last year attacked companies for the large amounts of money they spent on advertising during tough times for the economy. Advertisers retorted that this sort of commercial activity keeps the economy turning.

Rising anti-Americanism is also affecting advertising, but sparking creativity as much as smothering it. Egypt's Americana, set up in the 1970s after all things American became the rage with Sadat's opening up (*infitah*) to the West, now signs off its ads on television with the phrase "100 percent Arab." A whole host of products and services are being touted on different Arab television channels as possessing "Arab authenticity" (*al-asaala al-arabiyya*). British supermarket chain Sainsbury had to close down newly opened megastores in Egypt after persistent rumors throughout 2001 that it was "pro-Israeli," which affected sales. Throughout the region Coca-Cola, Pepsi, and McDonald's have suffered for their American identity (in Syria they are not present at all), and even Procter & Gamble was hit because its major product, Ariel, bears the same name as the Israeli prime minister elected in February 2001.

Traditional Weddings in the Consumerist Era

Weddings among the wealthy have become hugely expensive affairs for both Muslims and Christians, and costs have also become prohibitive for lower-income social groups. The trend among elites is to stage a lavish orgy of conspicuous consumption in a five-star hotel, with an entertainment list including singers famous and not so famous, perhaps more than one belly dancer, and a luxurious buffet. In fact, weddings are a major source of income for Arab singers, who command huge rates to turn up and may squeeze three or four weddings into an evening. In Damascus, expensive weddings—the subject of a social anthropological study by Nancy Lindisfarne Tapper—are an art form for affluent and influential families. In one example from 1995, a television director was hired to stage a wedding at the Sheraton Hotel in which the bride rode into the central procession, or *zaffa*, on a camel. Palestinian writer Edward Said bitterly criticized the conspicuous consumption at Palestinian elite weddings, especially among officials of the Palestinian Authority, under continuing Israeli occupation. Marriage has become so expensive in the United Arab Emirates that many men are marrying foreign women instead, usually Indians or Iranians. Costs have soared to around $100,000, despite 1998 laws that fine families for overly lavish weddings and restrict dowries to $10,000 maximum. A government fund was set up in 1992 to lend around $20,000 to men of limited means to help them get married and to discourage them from turning to foreign women. At the same time, Emirate women also turn to foreigners, fearing the strict social customs that men are likely to force on them, which could tie them to family life at an early stage before they have developed a career. The UAE's indigenous population numbers less than one million, around one-third of the total, and entire sections of its cities are built by and for foreign nationals, mainly Pakistanis, Indians, Filipinos, other Arabs, and Britons. So while the government wants to keep the foreigners to maintain the UAE's international status and affluence, it desperately wants to preserve Emi-

rati purity and ensure it doesn't lose control of its own country.

In Egypt, weddings have always been loud and rambunctious affairs. In crowded lower-class districts, street weddings are usually the order of the day, involving belly dancers, singers with a traditional band pumping out *shaabi* music, and dancing in the streets. It will go on for hours into the night, and throughout it all the bride and groom will sit on two thronelike chairs on a platform, paraded before the crowds. More city customs include a nighttime ride by car through the city with horn-blowing to announce the marriage, before stopping on one of the road bridges over the Nile for a midnight souvenir photograph. In most Arab societies, social customs are demanding. First there is the engagement party, where the groom presents the bride with a wedding present of jewelry called the *shabka*, which can be anything from a ring to a whole set of necklaces, earrings, and other accessories, forming part of the basic haggling a prospective groom must go through with the lady's family. The groom is also expected to provide a flat for the couple, though they usually share furniture costs. These days middle- and upper-class families film the entire proceedings, or even show footage of the bride and groom when they were younger. In Saudi Arabia, these wedding parties have become single-sex affairs, with the men in one room and the women in another. This is a modern religious innovation that runs counter to local customs in many areas, such as the more liberal west coast region of Saudi Arabia known as the Hejaz.

The visit to the hairdresser is crucial for women, and in many societies the bride has elaborate henna patterns painted on her arms and feet. Henna is a paste made from the leaves of the henna plant and used to

Moroccan women mixing henna before applying it in intricate designs to the hands and feet of a bride before a wedding. (Michelle Garrett/Corbis)

dye hair as well as to tattoo decorations on women. The patterns and mix of the henna vary from region to region. The Arab world mainly uses large floral patterns limited to hands and feet, while in India the entire arm can be covered in paisley patterns. Both use a reddish-brown color, while in sub-Saharan Africa black is the preferred color. Henna itself is a small shrub called *Lawsonia inermis* (also known as al-Khanna, Mehndi, and Egyptian privet), which grows throughout the middle zone of Africa and Asia, from Morocco through Malaysia. The leaves, flowers, and twigs of the plant are ground into a fine powder and then mixed with hot water. Leaves of other plants—indigo, tea, coffee, cloves, lemon—can be added to give different colors, plus sugar and oil to make sure the patterns don't immediately wash away. This powder mix is sieved through a nylon cloth, at which point industrial chemicals might also be added if it's for mass consumption and sale in shops.

The Internet's Slow Advance in the Arab Region

The huge space that the Internet has occupied in public consciousness is grossly disproportionate to the very weak penetration of the information and communication network in the Arab region. Governments and ruling elites fear that the Internet is a conduit for spreading political and moral subversion, and this fear has dominated the discourse on the use of the technology. The wicked power of the Internet was heavily present in the 1999 Yousef Chahine film *The Other* (*al-Akhar*), where actress Nabila Ebeid is presented as an American computer-whiz mom who uses cyber prowess to track her son's movements and his romantic attachments with women. According to the measure provided by *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman—that "the more installed bandwidth your country has, the greater its degree of connectivity"—the region scores badly (Friedman 1999). According to the UNDP's Arab Human Development Report, Arabs represent 0.5 percent of Internet users, but 5 percent of the world's population. In 2002 even Lebanon had only an estimated 90,000 Internet subscribers and 250,000 users. "The Arab region does not score too badly with respect to telephone lines and personal computers per thousand people, but it ranks last with respect to web sites and Internet users," the report said. Way ahead of any other Arab country in number of Web sites and users is the tiny United Arab Emirates, with its Dubai Internet City that has attracted leading international companies and provided Dubai with a sophisticated information network covering homes, schools, and businesses, but it is aimed primarily at foreign businesses. Egypt has up to 500,000 users, though the figure is set to reach over 2.5 million by 2006. Iraqis had only selective access to the Internet before the fall of the Baath regime in 2003, when it was hugely popular for offering a window on a closed world. Internet cafes are crammed with people reading newspapers online, finding out about new technologies, and following sports news.

But control mechanisms are never absent. The UAE allows only one service provider, which blocks access to sites deemed by the government to be socially, politically, or religiously unacceptable, but its filters can be rather arbitrary—a word-based search may prevent access to sites containing words like "Sussex," and

while the user can enter the site of Israeli daily *Haaretz*, some of its pages won't open. Saudi Arabia is the strictest of all, blocking access to sites with criticism of the royal family. Many access Jordanian servers to get easy access to political information, pornography, and extremist Islamic Web sites. Oman, where fear of foreigners busting local values is equally strong, has a ban on all free e-mail sites like hotmail, forcing users to access them through illegal and very slow proxy servers. Tunisia and Egypt have prosecuted people for placing sexual and political information on the Net that governments didn't like. Egypt is one of the Arab countries that prides itself on its free Web access, choosing not to turn off the tap. But a special police task force apprehends men and women using the Web to seek or advertise sex. A lightweight site called *dabboor* ("hornet") was forced by its server to close down a section on insults in colloquial Arabic, and the son of celebrated Egyptian playwright and poet Naguib Sorour was given a one-year prison sentence in 2002 for publishing an infamous anti-regime poem that makes inventive use of colloquial Arabic swearwords—a no-no in print, television, and cinema. The poem was a passionate expression of the rage that gripped people after the 1967 defeat, aimed at a regime that demanded the sacrifice of civil liberties for nothing in return. Using Egyptian slang, it ripped into the "prostitution" of Sadat's pro-West policies and corrupt rule, as well as hypocrisy and nepotism in intellectual circles (themes repeated and expanded upon, albeit in higher language, by the late, celebrated Syrian poet Nizar Qabbani in his controversial poem *Mata Yu'linun Wafaat al-Arab?* or *When Will They Announce the Death of the Arabs?*, published in *al-Hayat* in 1994). Sorour himself was never hauled in over the poem, yet his son—who remains in self-imposed exile in Russia, where he has nationality—suffered two years after posting it on a Web site based in the United States. The site, www.wadada.net, now has audio files of the poem and English, French, and Russian translations. "Arab regimes are scared to death of the pan-Arab cyber-unity," Sorour's son Shohdy wrote in an e-mail contact with the *Cairo Times* (*Cairo Times*, 17 October 2002). "The Arabs have not yet known any efficient dissident movement and are on the verge of finding out that their regimes are helpless in the face of this new threat." Critics of this rigorous Internet policing say the obsession with maintaining a certain form of moral society is intimately linked to a sense of subjugation to the West, and a desire to claim superiority despite that fact. Acknowledging obscenity "might lead to the wicked suggestion that our cultural superiority to the West is essentially based in hypocrisy," leftist writer Hani Shukrallah wrote (*al-Ahram Weekly*, 29 August 2002). "Our region may be on the brink of disaster, our economy is in shambles, we've never been as maligned and humiliated, but, hey, we remain as chaste as the driven snow. The late Naguib Sorour, his voice echoing from the grave, begged to differ, rather graphically."

Government fears have proved to be something of a self-fulfilling prophecy. In reaction to the suppression, a subversive youth Internet culture is emerging. Web chatrooms in Arabic are a forum for saying all the nasty things about Arab rulers that can't be said in public (particularly political jokes concerning Tunisia and prewar Iraq). "With Arabic websites and Arab is-

sues, the internet is important since it offers breathing space for freedoms in light of the blackout imposed on frank and open expression of opinion under the current authorities," wrote one writer in the *al-Hayat* newspaper (*al-Hayat*, 3 October 2002). The Internet is forming a minirevolution, a version of the wider one that took place with Arabic satellite television. All sorts of repressed, hidden debates and sociopolitical groups have been afforded space, from arguments over who built the pyramids to Islamist politics to belly dancing.

Islam has scored big through the Internet. There are numerous Islamic Web sites, and one of the biggest and most successful is www.IslamOnline.net (an English-language site, overseen by Sheikh Yousef al-Qaradawi and other scholars, it represents the Islamic mainstream), set up in Qatar and Cairo in 1999, and which now has around 2.8 million hits a day for news and religious views on Islam and Islamic countries. Islamist radical groups have also made use of Web sites, although there's no sign yet that the Internet will do for bin Laden what cassette tapes did for Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran. Radical Islamists who in 2003 launched an insurgency against the Saudi monarchy in the name of al-Qa'ida launched a parallel propaganda war on the Internet in 2004. They and their supporters filled the chatrooms of popular Islamic Web sites (islah.net, qal3ati.net, alsaha.net) with reports of the campaign against foreign forces and allied governments in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Saudi Arabia. The Saudi group launched a monthly Web magazine called *Sawt al-Jihad* (*Voice of the Holy War*), and groups in Iraq such as the Tawhid and Jihad Group (headed by Jordanian Abu Musab al-Zarqawi) joined the fray with their own Web site with postings carrying videotapes of the murder of foreign hostages and audiotapes of sermons by their leaders. The chatroom strings even carried links to Web pages with training manuals on bomb-making, weapons handling, and how to stage an assassination. The groups with their own sites have had to engage in a game of hide-and-seek with Internet providers, but there is too much space in the vastness of the World Wide Web to keep them down. On occasion they have been known to choose an innocuous chatroom of, say, an Arabic music site to announce a kidnapping or murder of a hostage, then simply wait for a sympathizer to find the statement and post it in the regular Islamist chatrooms for the world to see. In general, political Islam in the Arab world, led by educated professionals such as doctors, lawyers, and engineers, has quickly made use of modern technology. Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, a bastion of modern Islamism, is the best example. When the government first began a new crackdown against them in 1995, Egypt's interior ministry would relay breathless reports to the state press listing the computer equipment uncovered among the allegedly radical pamphlets and books that police seized at the homes of Muslim Brothers during their meetings—showing paranoia over what one paper termed the "Cyber Brother" (*Middle East Times*, December 1995). Compared with the government, Islamists seem more attuned to the modern world, a continuing element of their appeal to young people.

Fashion, Waistlines, and Plastic Surgery

Fashion around the region diverges dramatically. Western and Islamic fashion exist side by side, and both have their hierar-

chies. The elites of Beirut, Cairo, Tunis, and Rabat are at the forefront of Western fashion. The Gulf excels in Islamic fashions for women, while Egypt is home to lower-class conservative dressing. Bedouin and rural fashions are becoming hip among educated classes throughout the region—usually with silver jewelry—in the same way that ethnic dressing is fashionable in the West. Lebanon has a number of respected designers, such as Ziad Nakad, Elie Saab, Robert Abi Nader, Georges Chakra (who dresses members of the Saudi royal family), Georges Hobeika, and Zuheir Murad, and some of them have established reputations in Paris; there is even a Saudi designer in Paris, Yehya al-Bashary. Actress Halle Berry accepted her Best Actress Academy Award (Oscar) in 2002 in a sweeping burgundy gown created by Lebanese designer Saab (although Lebanese fashion is often criticized internationally for an abundance of golden embroidery and flashy baubles). Women in entertainment operate in a diverse and complex environment, from liberal Lebanon to ultraconservative Saudi Arabia where women must veil and cannot sing in public. In general, they must try to steer a middle course with their appearance between the choices presented by ascendant political Islam and the West. The well-dressed young presenters on Lebanon's Zein channel include a woman with short orange hair and earrings—prohibited elsewhere in the region. Lebanon has a recognized place in the Arab world as the testing ground for how the latest Western trends will be received in the region. Like anywhere else, pop stars and actors have become the setters of trends. Singers like Amr Diab, Nawal al-Zoghby, and Mohammed Mounir have sent millions of youth down a particular path of fashion, though the degree to which public figures become role models is obscured by a lack of statistical information and prejudice against youth culture. Syrian singer Asala, for example, presents a liberal aesthetic with conservative trimmings. "I've always tried to be moderate. I wear the same style of clothes of most girls in the Arab world and I don't wear a veil," she said ("Sultry Arab Singer Defends Self from Slurs," Reuters, 15 May 2004).

Women's attire has become highly politicized for Muslims since the 1970s, though there are many reasons for women donning the veil. A burgeoning young population means more men hassling women. Many institutions and communities will show more respect to a veiled woman than to an uncovered woman. State television in countries like Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, and Iraq promote unveiled women as a sign of modernity. The Hizbollah-run al-Manar TV station glories in women newscasters with white veils sharply formed in the shape of Israel/Palestine, and one can expect something similar if Jordan's Muslim Brotherhood succeeds in obtaining a TV license from the authorities in Amman. Veils are also big business, with shops specializing in Islamic attire all over the region. But in themselves they do not mean chastity. The veil has become a fashion accessory among elite urban youth in places like Cairo, worn above jeans and accompanied by makeup smuggled out of the house in handbags behind father's back but with mother's consent. The veil can provide a convenient cover for groups of girls to flirt on streets, in shopping malls, on sea promenades, or in any of the trendy middle-class *shisha* cafes in capitals like Beirut and Cairo. In Saudi Arabia women must appear in public with black cloaks and hoods (the *abeya*) and face the prospect of religious police hassling them to

A nightclub in the Egyptian tourist resort of Hurghada. (The Cover Story/Corbis)

cover up properly if they don't stick to the rules, but they still manage to surreptitiously exchange telephone numbers with men in shopping malls. Despite the strict rules on attire, fashion, clothes, jewelry, and makeup are major industries in Saudi Arabia. Retailers estimate that Kuwait, a sprawl of six-lane motorways, gleaming skyscrapers, and futuristic-looking towers without bars or nightclubs, is one of the biggest consumers of luxury items per person in the world, with women spending around $500 to $800 a month on perfume and beauty products alone. Competition among women in the fashion game is strong, and few Saudi women really complain about having to appear in public in black robes, which impose a kind of ceasefire in public space among women, rather like the theory often proffered by schools in the West for enforcing school uniforms. In Cairo, a shocked tabloid once revealed nefarious activities by veiled women in the relative privacy of the backseats of air-conditioned public buses, while most poor folks cram into ramshackle, cheaper alternatives. "Unfortunately, young people of both sexes have exploited this air-conditioned bus for romantic trysts on the back seat. These youth love-seats are witnessing shocking and extremely inappropriate scenes that require the immediate interference of the morality police," *al-Khamis* said (7 September 2000). Jewelry is accorded great value in Arab culture, particularly gold. Bahrain has the region's biggest gold market, with close competition from Dubai. Gold has always been popular in the Gulf region and in Arab tribal society in general, and the preference has transferred to lower-class groups in urban Arab societies. Kilos of jewelry will be presented by men as gifts for a woman's hand in marriage. But urban elites and middle and upper classes in those urban societies, such as Beirut and Cairo, don't have the gold ob-

session. Men outside affluent Gulf society are also less inclined toward gold because of Islamic traditions that see silk and gold as inappropriate for men—they opt instead for silver or white-gold engagement and wedding rings. Silver isn't popular among men or women in the Gulf because it's seen as a poor second to more expensive gold, and diamonds and precious stones are only popular as a part of the gold jewelry. In North Africa, elaborate wedding dresses threaded with gold are made locally for weddings, while the upper classes in the Mashreq prefer to buy dresses from abroad. Perfumes are also hugely popular and involve ancient traditions. Apart from the modern manufactured versions imported from the West, men and women use an array of local perfumes, including sandalwood, amber, jasmine, rose, and fruit extracts.

Lebanon hosts numerous beauty pageants, even one for Miss Lebanon Abroad, tapping into the large expat community around the world, while Egypt tries to keep up with it, despite vocal opposition from Islamists in parliament and the press. In another era and another time, Egypt actually won Miss World in 1954: the lucky lady, Antigone Constanda, hailed from the country's Jewish and Greek communities and now lives in Athens. Fashion consciousness has been a feature of affluent Lebanese society for most of the twentieth century but it reached new heights after the civil war ended in 1990. Perhaps emerging from the fifteen-year experience with an emboldened desire to live for the moment, Lebanese women have made plastic surgery the norm in Lebanese society, even among teenage girls still at school. Beirut saw an art exhibition in 1999 featuring plaster casts of large, bulbous Lebanese noses

A stage show at the Babylon Festival in Iraq in the 1990s. (Norbert Schiller/Focus MidEast)

in an effort to defend what its organizers said was an endangered species amidst the craze for the perfect nose. In 1965, the Lebanese Society of Plastic, Reconstructive, and Aesthetic Surgery had six surgeons; today it has over forty. Other facial fashions of the moment in Lebanon include "face peeling" (*il-peeling*) to achieve a shiny white complexion; lifting the skin by the sides of the eyes to give a sexy, feline look; adding bone to cheeks and chins for additional felinity; hair implants; pumping up lips; and dyeing hair blonde to look European. This look has become the norm for television presenters, pop stars, and actresses. Tunisian presenter Kawthar al-Bishrawy, who walked out of al-Jazeera over the scant regard given to her cultural affairs show, has attacked the bimbo-presenter phenomenon in the Arabic press: "I'm shocked to the heart when I see the huge amount of female presenters compet-

ing to wear fashion which exposes themselves, colored contact lenses and dyed hair. Worst of all is the kisses and winks" (*Rose al-Yousef*, 20 December 2002). It's a radical shift in tastes. A Levantine folk song used to say: "Her lips are as fine as a cup's rim / Her cheeks are red like a pomegranate / There's nothing like her in all Syria."

Both Cairo and Beirut offer considerably cheaper prices for cosmetic surgery than Europe and the United States, attracting business from around the Arab region and abroad. There is hardly an actress in Egypt or Lebanon who hasn't had something done. When over-fifty actresses are congratulated by TV interviewers on their new look, what is usually meant is their new facelift. Although somewhere close to age seventy, Nadia al-Gindy and Nabila Ebeid look twenty years younger. According to the Arabic Web site albawaba.com, the number of plastic surgery operations in the

Modernization Threatens Traditional Medicine in the Gulf

The United Arab Emirates is making an intensive effort to save indigenous Bedouin medicines. Mazen Ali Naji, director of the Zayed Complex for Herbal Research and Traditional Medicine, located outside Abu Dhabi, said information that transferred through generations of families is in danger of being lost in a rush toward modernization—living in concrete city blocks, eating at McDonald's, and relying on modern drugstores. "We are trying to go out and visit these people from Bedouin tribes, and gather the information they pass on to their sons but which has not been documented. Our aim is to record," he said (interview with author, August 2003). "Herbs growing in the desert are very effective because they are concentrated and grown naturally without human interference." These herbs have important uses. *Shweika* was effective against hepatitis B; *al-ashkhar* is for colon disturbance and irritable bowel disease; *garadh* is for gastric ulcers; and *tartouth* is a "sexual enhancer," as Naji puts it. "We extract the active materials, but we keep the whole concentrate rather than just taking the active ingredient, which is what happens with chemical-based medicines," Naji said (interview with author, August 2003). So far the center has produced ten products that are offered for free to UAE nationals and for a small cost to residents. Amazingly, so far the international drug companies are unaware of this gold mine of plants in the Arabian Peninsula, and the center has only just begun the process of patenting its Viagra-like *tartouth,* which is produced in Britain. The UAE is part of a botanical region of the Middle East renowned for unique plant life. There are three regions: an African one that includes Yemen and Saudi Arabia; a Sindo-Arabian region that comprises North Africa, the coastal areas of the Arabian Peninsula, and India; and the Iran/Turan area, which includes the Persian Gulf countries of Iraq, Iran, the UAE, and Oman. The key to uncovering this knowledge is yearly visits to sites and traditional apothecaries in the still-undeveloped rural areas of the UAE, such as Ras al-Khaimah and Fujeirah, which are worlds away from Dubai and Abu Dhabi. "I don't want to [distinguish] between herbal and modern medicine—acute cases should be treated in hospitals. But while modern medicines used over the last fifty years have side effects, herbal medicines have been used for hundreds of years. However, people became modern and adopted city living, and the young generation is interested in pharmacy drugs and the apothecaries are old," Naji said (interview with author, August 2003).

Arab world jumped to 650,000 operations in 2003 from 380,000 the year before, and in Egypt alone the figure jumped from 55,000 to 120,000. "The reason is that Arab women got frustrated from the continuous stress put by Arab husbands in comparing their wives with the female singers and actresses, especially those with very seducing music video clips," the Web site said, suggesting the explosion of seductive music videos also had something to do with a rise in divorce rates (17 January 2004). There was one noted case in 2003 of an Egyptian man who divorced his wife because he said she had wasted his savings to try to look like feline Lebanese pop singer Nancy Ajram; she filed a countersuit for divorce saying his adoration of Ajram amounted to infidelity. Prices for plastic surgery are relatively cheap, in global terms. The site reported that Ajram's new figure cost just over $1,000; the lips of Lebanese singer Elissa cost $500; Lebanese singer Haifa Wahby's breast operation cost $1,000; and Nawal al-Zoghby's nose cost just under $1,000. Said Cairo cosmetic surgeon Ali Muftah: "Even those actresses who veiled have had plastic surgery after they veiled, including those who wear the niqab (full face-covering veil).

Physique is one thing and religious behaviour is something else. Being covered is not an alternative to plastic surgery" (*Middle East Times*, February 1996). In Egypt, women undergoing breast operations increasingly want to make them firmer rather than bigger, a sign that Western concepts of breast beauty are making their mark on oriental tastes. Egypt's Pharaonic civilization had its own primitive form of plastic surgery, and it was an Egyptian doctor who in the 1970s pioneered the use of penile rods to deal with impotence. There

Nancy Ajram, the Lebanese singer who shot to fame with her coquettish style, popularized plastic surgery in the Arab world. (Ali Jarekji/Reuters/Corbis)

is even a brand of face cream on Lebanese and Egyptian television that claims to whiten the skin over a period of six weeks. Among men, before recent developments in hair transplant technology, toupees were extremely common in show business, and they're still proudly championed by famous actors Samir Ghanem, Adel Imam, and Samir Sabri. After nurturing a sexy, revolutionary image in the 1970s, Libya's Muammar Gaddafi was visibly suffering hair loss in the 1990s, but *al-Hayat* once revealed that Arab doctors in Brazil set things straight with transplants. During a visit to Cairo in 1996, Gaddafi railed against Western shampoos, saying they were full of chemicals that caused hair loss. "Real Arabs don't use shampoo," he declared in a meeting with university students.

In a study of British fashion in the swinging sixties, Shawn Levy noted that even physique was different then because postwar babies had wanted for food as they grew up—hence, the beautiful skinny people of the wanton era (Levy 2002). Over the last fifty years in general, concepts of feminine beauty in the West seem to have moved from the hourglass ideal, with large busts and hips, to a more androgynous figure and look (according to a *British Medical Journal* study published in December 2002). In the Arab world, fat has traditionally been considered a good thing, because it meant one was well fed, a sign of prosperity. Western conceptions of beauty have permeated mindsets to some degree. Gossip columns are full of news about cinema sex symbol Leila Elwi when she tries to shed some weight, while the public likes her large—rival star Yousra became more popular when she put more weight on her skinny frame. Up until now, being slim has implied a lack of nourishment. Advertising, fashion, music, cinema, and television are changing all that. But androgyny has yet to make a mark: large busts and a decidedly feminine face are very much "in," no matter what size a woman is.

Eating habits are also diversifying, though it's hard to say for good or ill. Western, chemical-filled, packaged food in supermarkets might be no better than fatty local foods, while Iraqi children have been malnourished by over a decade of United Nations sanctions, which now have been lifted. Arab women's summits offer interesting views on the state of women's fashion in the Arab world. Egypt's first lady, Suzanne Mubarak, offers the image of an older, Western-dressed women, while Jordan's Queen Rania and Syrian first lady Asma al-Assad are young and fashionably dressed like TV presenters. Ironically, Rania is not at all popular in Jordan, precisely because she strikes such a Western image in a country where most women, whether Palestinian or Bedouin, are conservatively dressed. Jordanians, however, were able to tolerate Western influence in their first lady when she was a foreigner: King Hussein's American wife Queen Noor was generally popular. The wives of some Gulf rulers usually take the podium at Arab gatherings in complete, head-covering veils, and television cameras draw back to make sure viewers don't clearly see those who show their faces. But moves are currently afoot in Qatar and Bahrain to present a new image, and the faces of the rulers' wives have begun appearing in newspapers as part of a new modernity drive.

Nightlife in the Arab Capitals

Drinking is still marginalized as a foible of working-class men, on the one hand, and elite Westernized youth, on the other, but consumption is rising. Young people are drinking more and smoking is rife, even among women, for whom *shisha*-pipes have become trendy in Egypt and the Levant. Western-style nightlife has gained a foothold in most capitals of the region. This nightlife is at its most developed in Beirut, where there is quick turnover of bars that need to repackage themselves to keep customers, and least prevalent in capitals like Riyadh (where *shisha* cafes are banished to the city limits), Kuwait City, and Khartoum, where even five-star hotels won't sell alcohol to foreigners. In Oman, the Emirates, Bahrain, and Qatar the rules are looser. Nothing quite matches nightlife in the Emirate of Dubai. Though alcohol is

banned in the neighboring Emirate of Sharjah, Dubai excels in drinking holes of various types: English/Irish pubs that appeal to Western expats, Indian working men's clubs where women dance on stage to Indian pop, Lebanese bars oozing in affluent Arab chic, and cattle-market bars for prostitutes from all over the world.

Nightlife has taken off in Damascus since Hafez al-Assad was succeeded by his son Bashar, who encouraged hope of political and economic changes in the country. Although a poor cousin to Beirut, Damascus now has a number of bars, restaurants, and clubs catering to increasingly outgoing elites. Bashar has his favorites, and former Syrian defense minister mustafa Tlas can sometimes be found dancing in a nightclub called Iguana. In style, many of these places mix Arab/Ottoman décor and architecture with Western styles—such as the Omayyad Palace Restaurant and Piano Bar. Syrians are buying up traditional houses with secluded open-air courtyards, long abandoned by rich Damascene families in favor of modern flats, and converting them into cafes. At MarMar, a fashionable pub in the Christian quarter of Bab Touma, young men and women drink alcohol and dance all night to Western and Arabpop music. Nearby at Elissar, a mix of Syrians, Lebanese, and Europeans eat mezzes (traditional Middle Eastern appetizers like hummus and stuffed grape leaves) at tables set around a nineteenth-century courtyard fountain in a house decorated in marble with an elaborate painted wooden ceiling. Down the street is Oxygen, a late-night restaurant, which made headlines in April 2002 when its owner asked the American consul in Damascus to leave in protest over American support for Israel's crushing of the Palestinian uprising. In Aleppo, houses that once belonged to rich Christian traders have been converted into charming hotels.

The redevelopment of the old city of Damascus, where some of these bars and restaurants are to be found, has been controversial. "Old" and "traditional" Damascus has become another element in the nouveau riche culture of consumerism, as people rush to preserve something of the past. Like other cities in the region, Damascus has been transformed by population growth and rural migration. Whole suburbs with tenement housing have sprung up; old two-story buildings have been replaced by high-rises, even in the old city itself; and Damascus's traditional elite families feel under threat from the newcomers. Damascenes complain that Syrians of the Alawi sect, which has dominated in the country since the Assad clan came to power in the 1960s, have taken over their city, dominating state positions and owning property, while Alawis say only a select few of them have been able to join in with the Damascene Muslim and Christian elites who still run the show. A body of nostalgia literature has emerged in the last twenty years, reminiscing over the pre-concrete city, such as *Dimashq al-Asrar* (*Damascus of Secrets*) by Nasreddin al-Bahra, published in 1992. A Society of Friends of Damascus set up in 1977 is still going strong among the old social elites.

The marketing of nostalgia in night culture has been slower to emerge in Cairo, but it's there all the same. A bar-restaurant called Abu Sid opened in 2000 in the fashionable Zamalek district, featuring Arabesque décor of elaborate chandeliers and posters of classical singer Umm Kalthoum, mixed with Louis Farouk furniture adopted from the French in the nineteenth century

to become a standard of middle-class Egyptian culture (the flats of newlyweds of means must always have a Louis Farouk sofa and chairs for hosting guests). The music at Abu Sid is the latest Arabpop, and pop stars and actors can be seen huddled at tables in intimate tête-à-têtes. At the downtown Grillon, leftist artist and intellectuals hang out late into the night. A second Abu Sid opened in the affluent suburb of Dokki, and the Jordanian capital Amman also has a branch under the name Nai (meaning "reed flute"), with the same décor and attracting a similar moneyed crowd.

Amman has been transformed in recent years, with bars, fast cars, and fancy clothes a marked feature of a capital city once famed for its austerity and boredom. The change was partly due to Palestinian money that flowed into the country after Palestinians left Kuwait during and after the 1990–1991 Gulf War—an appropriate second wind, in that Palestinians flooded the country in 1948, giving Jordan its initial boost, and Amman is a city largely built by Palestinians. Unlike in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, the Emirates has allowed a Western-style nightlife to develop that caters to its large expat population. Many countries have developed their own special tourist strips, mini–Sin Cities where Arabs can mingle with and behave like Westerners—Egypt's Sharm al-Sheikh, Tunisia's Hammamat, Lebanon's Jounieh. Some tourist areas have developed in Goa-like hippie colonies, such as Egypt's Dahab, Tunisia's Jerba Island, and numerous locations in Morocco, a key stopping point on the hippie trail since the 1960s. In places like this, local women find the freedom to walk around like Westerners, while in other resorts around the region, women in hejabs will take a dip in the water with their clothes on (these being the conservative majority that Egyptian singer Shereen Wagdy hoped to appeal to in a pop video from 2002 where she swam fully clothed in Thailand).

Some cities have it all. Marrakesh has a reputation for nightlife that covers modern discos to belly dancing, in ancient and modern settings. The medina, or the Islamic-era heart of the city, is alive with cafés, food stalls, and street entertainment, with everything revolving around the central square, or Jemaa al-Fna. Several of the hotels have rooftop cafes overlooking the square, while a number of old merchant houses known as *riyadhs* have been converted into upmarket restaurants offering an authentic Moroccan experience, including feasts, music, and dancing. There are some nightclubs, but unlike in Beirut, they tend to be geared toward tourists and are found mainly in hotels. Beirut is the only city in the region where discos are not the hunting ground of local prostitutes and young men looking for foreign women. Egypt, Lebanon, and Morocco have casinos that attract Gulf Arabs and Libyans, in whose countries casinos are banned because of Islamic mores. The prohibition of usury or interest is also the basic principle of Islamic banking, which outlaws investments in companies involved in gambling, alcohol, and pig farming. In Egypt it is illegal for Egyptians to play in these casinos, though the state taxes horse-betting—some religious figures have argued that it's not a sin to bet if one is sure of the result. Thus, in Saudi Arabia—as Islamically strict as it gets—punters write down their names and the names of the horses they think will win each race on a ballot paper that comes with the entrance fee and then put the papers in a designated ballot box. There is

The Jemaa al-Fna in the old Islamic city, or medina, of Marrakesh in Morocco. (TRIP/Art Directors)

The Jemaa comes alive with cafes, markets, and entertainment in the evening. (TRIP/Art Directors)

Egyptians, who have lived through the terms of three presidents since 1954, look down on punters in a Cairo coffee shop. (Norbert Schiller/Focus MidEast)

also a phone ballot system and the prizes are financed by the cost of the calls and the entrance receipts. Actor Omar Sharif was as famous for his gambling as for his film roles. Before the 1952 revolution, gambling was a favorite sport of Egypt's upper classes. One of the most controversial Arab casinos in the region was the Oasis Casino, set up with Palestinian Authority (PA) approval outside the ancient city of Jericho in the Jordan Valley—somewhere not too far from the biblical Sodom and Gomorrah. Attracting Israelis who can't gamble in Israel because of religious dictates, and staffed by Palestinians and foreign workers, the casino was set to bring significant tax revenue to the PA before the uprising forced its closure. It was the subject of considerable debate in both Palestinian and Israeli society. Jewish and Muslim religious bodies said it was immoral, and Israeli right-wingers said the PA was sending suicide bombers to kill Israelis with money made from Israelis in the casino. Its closure has been a big loss to the PA coffers.

Shopping, Fast Food, and Eating Out

Except for the wealthy Gulf countries, eating out in restaurants is not as popular a pastime as it is in the West, but customs are changing. Western fast-food chains have become heavily present in the region over the last decade and have found a certain cachet among middle-class families. Taking the family to McDonald's, or ordering food for delivery, is a badge of membership in nouveau riche society. Many capitals in the region now have their fast-food

strips, where the young and hip hang out in their cars and where Gulf tourists spend much of their summer. McDonald's even offers special takeaway Ramadan iftars that families can order for breaking daytime fasts. In fact, these restaurants are not really fast food at all, at least as the concept was originally conceived of in America. In Arab countries they are hip places for hanging out, wearing trendy clothes, and being seen. "Fast food" already existed, but according to an indigenous model: cheap takeaway cafes, often not that clean, offering shawarma, fava beans, falafel sandwiches, and so on for the masses. For these reasons those with money have avoided them, but in recent years this kind of food has developed its own cachet in response to the plethora of Western fast-food chains that have arrived. Now you can have a feast of cheap local food in clean local restaurants in many Arab capitals for the same price as one Big Mac meal. In the current anti-American climate, it's even seen as the patriotic choice to eat at local places. The elites of the big capitals have a choice of many expensive restaurants, offering French, Italian, and oriental cuisine. Chinese, Japanese, Mexican, and Indian foods are less popular, though all are found in most capitals. Of local cooking, Levantine/Lebanese food is popular throughout the region, and Moroccan is highly prized, though there are fewer Moroccan than Lebanese restaurants. Levantine women are seen as a big catch for Arab men because of their cooking talents.

Shopping mall culture has spread westward from the Gulf, where Western luxury goods have made inroads. The Faisaliya Center in Riyadh includes the prestigious British department store Harvey Nichols, and Hermes, Louis Vuitton, Calvin Klein, Christian Dior, and Chopard all have outlets in the Middle East. British department store Harrods, headed by Egyptian Mohammed al-Fayed, is set to expand in the Gulf with a series of shops. Saks Fifth Avenue, the German leather goods retailer Aigner, and Gianfranco Ferre are also competing in the developing consumer market. Dubai is the shopping capital of the Middle East. The most easygoing city in the region, Dubai has extensive duty-free shopping and an annual shopping festival, though really shopping is what you do in Dubai twelve months of the year. Dubai most likely has a higher number of shopping malls per square kilometer than any other city in the world, and perhaps the biggest number of restaurants too, including Indian, Iranian, Chinese, and various Arab cuisines. Beirut is another shopping magnet in the Middle East. On the weekends, Syria's elite classes head to Beirut in droves to shop in the upmarket Verdun district of West Beirut. They also bank with Lebanon's banks. Syria's banking sector is dire, while the Lebanese sector is highly developed.

In the Gulf itself there is no sign that the shopping industry is going to slow its pace. Dubai is planning massive expansion in the retail sector, and though the local market might seem saturated, developers have calculated they can bring in business for the new malls from outside the UAE by marketing Dubai as a shopping heaven fortuitously placed between the Middle East and south Asia. Dubai is just two hours' flight time away from major markets including Iran, India, Pakistan, and Arab countries, which together form a $1.5 billion strong market. Central to this extraordinary bid to attract the consumer tourist is the "shopping festival" concept that Dubai specializes in, even in the city's muggy

summers. During the "Dubai Summer Surprises" campaign, hotels are encouraged to offer a range of bargain packages, with extra free nights and transfers offered for those visiting during the spree. The Emirate is on target to become not only the Middle East's major shopping center, but also one of the globe's, thus making retail the engine room for the rest of the service sector. "Companies specialising in everything from retail software and mannequins to cleaning firms and interior decorators will also benefit from the trickle-down effect," one report said (Oxford Business Group 2004).

Bearing all this in mind, Islamists may wonder that the stark vision of a valueless, capitalist world offered by Islamist radical Sayed Qutb in his seminal *Ma'alim Fil-Tareeq (Milestones)* is no less relevant than it was in the godless Arabist world of the 1960s when he wrote the hugely influential work. "The world now is in a 'state of ignorance' which is in no way eased by the formidable materialistic comforts of today . . . Arab society is one of the worst in terms of the distribution of wealth and justice. A small minority has wealth and business and increases its wealth through usury and the big majority has only hardship and hunger," Qutb wrote. "Yet we have something to give to mankind [Islam] which it does not have, something that isn't one of the 'products' of Western civilization or one of Eastern or Western European genius" (Qutb 1979, 8–25).

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