



Understanding the Evolution of the *Khaleeji* Identity

by *Lulwa Abdulla Al-Misned*

Modernity threatens the future of traditional khaleeji lifestyle

A *Khaleeji* (male) or *Khaleejiyah* (female) is a person from one of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states—or ‘*Gulfie*’ in colloquial English. My *Gulfie* generation was born in the late fifties, sixties, and seventies and witnessed the creation of the GCC states and the formalization of the *khaleeji* identity. We were taught in the earliest formal classrooms by the first non-*khaleeji* Arab-immigrants, who had strong Arab nationalist pride and enforced a heavy sense of Islamic religious values. By the 1980s, we were pushed into the labor market to pursue our careers, often in semi-segregated work environments. We lived in extended families with many siblings and cousins in closely connected houses with open yards. The boundaries between homes were almost nonexistent, and kids ran about crossing hypothetical property lines in pursuit of

any stimulating object, whether physically present or imagined into being. We memorized folk songs and played with dolls handmade from whatever raw materials we could find. By night time, we were ready for the universal bedtime story delivered by our mothers, grandmothers, and aunts.

We are the generation that had the best of both worlds. We were parented by a hardy pre-oil generation but grew up with the early years of the hydrocarbon economy, and we were given the benefits of free public goods and services, education, health, and housing, all facilitated by the rent of the extractive oil industry. It was a homogenous, integrated environment that found itself propelled into a much larger world. We knew who we were in the definitive sense, but we were to encounter several drivers of cultural change.

How times have changed

We, in our turn, parented a generation raised within the new city states in the Gulf. The mechanics of this change remain vivid in my memory. Starting in the 1980s, our generation pioneered the dual-bread-winning-parents approach in order to accommodate a contemporary *khaleeji* lifestyle. This approach would manifest in families building large villas with tall walls encompassing them. These walls stood white and vertical in silent declaration of their proprietary existence. Behind them came tiled yards, subsidized utilities, and imported domestic labor. It became the standard for the *khaleeji* lifestyle. This was made possible thanks to a hefty distribution of oil-rents through guaranteed public sector employment for both genders.

Governments owned the hydrocarbon assets and distributed these rents through various transfer mechanisms, without the need for public taxation. As such, they became agents of gradual class formation in societies that had never been structured vertically. The role of the tribe faded,

by the decline of the political and economic functions of the tribal structure, into an immaterial self-image anchor called upon only in ceremonial events. The nation-state was to take over the formation of self-identity. The institutional formation of the modern state and the formation of the civil society did not fully materialize due to the polarization of social power in governments' hands. Government transfers became handouts that were allocated based on political loyalty. With the absence of the legislative requirements permitting collective association and assembly, there was no chance for 'socialization' to build up civic virtues and develop the self-image of a citizen rather than one of a subject.

Capital cities within the GCC such as Abu Dhabi, Doha, Manama, and Riyadh underwent rapid development and relied on social capital growth to satisfy the demands of expanding economies. The optimal size of the economy was not based on calculations of the maximum extraction rate of hydrocarbon assets, as we all know. The extraction levels were determined most of the time by demand in the international markets for these strategic commodities.

The changing nature of our neighborhoods

In light of this rapid transformation, the spirit of the *fareej*, the indigenous *Gulfie* community, was difficult to perfectly preserve with the influx of expatriate neighbors from diverse cultural backgrounds. A new phase of "multiculturalism" in the Gulf was born as the nature of expat populations changed from the low skilled male workers who came to help build the infrastructure of these capital cities to expat professionals who came with their families to work in the growing industrial and services sectors.

These professionals lived on long-term work permits and raised their children within the Gulf's cities. Foreign embassies that represent large expatriate communities worked to establish schools for their citizens' children. Within Gulf cities, both

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nationals and expats shop at the same malls, buy from the same grocery stores, and go to the same cinemas. These interactions are reminders that our realities include other identities and cultures. Over time a double value system was created. The traditional and the modern, each brought by different drivers of cultural change, fueled the creation of a complex and often contradictory self-image. This explains the adherence to national cultures in some situations but the relaxation of tradition in others.

The decline of the middle class

The welfare states that the Gulf governments raised through the first few decades of oil rent had become unsustainable with the fluctuation of hydrocarbon revenues. That brought many economic and social challenges, such as growing youth unemployment and struggles with housing and social safety net programs. One important result was the decline of the middle class, which had been gradually formed by educated professional nationals. Moreover, a new "super class" was formed that became dependent on government transfers through procurements, agency privileges for international contracts, and business licenses with exclusivity rights. Class polarization in the Gulf societies became another factor impacting the sense of one community and one culture.

Ongoing de-Arabization

The phenomenon of the 'third culture kid' prevailed among our children. During the first decade of the 21st century, a new cultural nucleus of American and European higher education centers was established. These universities built regional campuses with the latest architectural

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design, high-tech classrooms, and guaranteed student numbers and numerous financial incentives. These campuses drive cultural change by omitting the national cultural context from their programs and activities.

Educational reform introduced English as a primary medium of study, undermining the region's Arabic cultural heritage. The influence of foreign consultancy services like the US-based Rand Corporation, McKinsey and Co, Price Waterhouse Coopers and Booz Allen have been perceived by many locals as a wave of cultural imperialism in the aftermath of the September 11 tragedy. Furthermore, neglecting the Arabic language as a paradigm of culture by using English as the medium of learning from the early years of childhood is a real challenge to children's self-identification as Arab. Generations of our children and grandchildren are cut off from many aspects of their history, literature, folklore, and lifestyle.

During the last decade, technology has been the main driver of cultural change. This process is facilitated by advanced communication channels and global marketing of cultural products by transnational mega conglomerates. The current preference is for pop culture, social media, and interactive video games delivered with a "postmodern" set of values. This "current" culture for many thinkers is not universal and not even based on the classical Western culture. The heritage of freedom, justice, and democracy that prevailed in the Western liberal cultural history has become devoid of meaning and decontextualized. We live in an era of aggressive inward individualism that is shaped and controlled by market interests rather than moral criteria. The boundaries of such totalitarian virtual dominance are amorphous, and so is the *khaleeji* identity today.

Under threat from its own impetus to modernize, from external influences and govern-

ment pressure, the *khaleeji* identity continues to evolve along a path that rejects and reduces the value of its traditional heritage. It's unclear what this will mean for the future of the identity of the *khaleeji* peoples.

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