

Identity and Culture in the 21st Century Gulf

Overview

by Magdalena Karolak, Theme Editor

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries entered the 21st century with greater maturity. Across the region, these states consolidated the many political, economic, and social projects that had been in progress since independence and state formation in the 20th century.

New challenges abound, however, as Gulf millennials enter a rapidly changing world facing regional conflicts and socioeconomic pressures. One of the core questions likely to shape the coming decades in the Gulf is the issue of identity. States must continue to forge strong national identities, while the creation of the GCC has paved the way for the growth of a pan-*khaleeji* identity. Formation of national identities in the Gulf has not been an easy project, as exemplified elsewhere in the Middle East. Religious, ethnic, tribal, and settlement cleavages that cut through the population are factors that make identification and loyalty with non-state structures more salient. The structures of power often determine these specific patterns of identification. Yet, it is also clear that identities, once crystallized, in turn impact the social structure.

The creation of strong national identities requires anchoring the nation's history in founding myths shared by all citizens. Indeed, a community exists thanks to a shared perception of the past, present, and future events that transcends individuals, linking their lives to those of their predecessors and their successors in a meaningful way. Attempts to revive and, most importantly, reconstruct history based on present needs, are widely observed in the Gulf. New museums, monuments, archaeological sites, and the revival of tradition all testify to this need. In the process, new meanings and national narratives are formed.

However, in search of uniformity and consolidation, what is inscribed in the collective memory often omits minority identities that do not easily fit the mainstream. Such strong national identities have been actively sought as the GCC attempts to move away from the rentier model and new generations of citizens are asked to contribute to their countries in various ways. Gulf newspapers often celebrate the talents and achievements of young citizens in various disciplines, while Saudi Arabia recently called on its citizens to sacrifice for their country with salary cuts in public jobs. Other types of sacrifice may be even more palpable as GCC countries intervene militarily in conflicts at home and abroad. Sacrifice for the country is, in turn, cherished through public celebrations of citizens' commitments and achievements, further strengthening national narratives.

The needs of the present also dictate another trend that shapes the Gulf, that of construction. Lacking monuments that could rival others in the Middle East, the GCC countries have embarked on extravagant building programs that put Gulf cities on the map among the most impressive architectural undertakings. With the tallest building in the world in Dubai (soon to be overshadowed by Jeddah Tower), and many other daring constructions and developments on the way, the Gulf cities have been transformed from somewhat sleepy trading towns to world centers, places to see and to be seen. The glamour that is a by-product of modernity does not undermine the fact that the Gulf strives to continue the legacy of Middle Eastern achievements. Many iconic buildings in the GCC stand out juxtaposed with the Egyptian pyramids in the Priceless Arabia MasterCard advertisement for the MENA region, for example. So far, facilitated by oil re-

sources, the Gulf further sets itself as a center of world banking, tourism, trade, shopping, and innovation, projecting its identity toward the future with a sense of pride.

Indeed, in a Middle East torn by conflicts and upheavals, the Gulf seems to hold a special place characterized by stability and progress. This search for stability was the reason for the creation of the GCC in the first place and makes “othering” from neighboring states easier. Yet, the *khaleeji* identity tied to the GCC project is characterized by fluidity, with cooperation at times closer or further away. However, the need for security and preservation of the Gulf’s political systems may dictate closer ties in the future. It is not a coincidence that the proposal of a Gulf union followed the GCC intervention in Bahrain. With the rising rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran over dominance in the Middle East, the GCC project, and hence *khaleeji* identity building, remains as valid as ever.

Lastly, it is clear that individuals need to self-identify with specific communities, practices, and institutions with which they form attachments. The study “Psychological Effects of Globalisation on Young Women and Men” conducted by the Dubai School of Government concluded that bilingual students in the UAE and Saudi Arabia are bicultural, as they identify with both local and global cultures. The GCC has some of the highest per-capita rates of internet use in the world and offers a particularly interesting case study. While at this point the internet has not eradicated local cultures, appropriation of cultural elements from elsewhere will have important effects in the future. This may raise interest in institutionalizing the protection of local cultures, taking into account the large presence of expatriates. In addition, networking opportunities offered by the internet have already proved important in the creation of collective identities on national and regional levels. The shift towards responsible and active citizenship will no doubt create more grassroots activism facilitated by the use of internet. Collective activism may ultimately be based on identities of groups that feel left out of the mainstream, bringing us back to the question of strong national identities.

This volume is a fine selection of analyses highlighting the many debates and multi-dimensional developments that are taking place. These extremely interesting intersections invite us to closely follow the subject of Gulf identities, no doubt leaving us with more questions than answers, which makes the reading even more rewarding.

Dr. Magdalena Karolak is Assistant Professor of Interdisciplinary Studies at Zayed University, UAE. She has published more than 30 journal articles and book chapters on various aspects of social, political and economic transformations in the GCC.