



Emirati men perform a traditional dance late on 28 October 2014 during a festival in the city of Al-Ain celebrating traditional culture.

## Monolithic Representations and Orientalist Credence in the UAE

by *Rana AlMutawa*

“ The United Arab Emirates (UAE) doesn’t have a rich culture, what’s there other than *yola* dances, falconry and *lugaimat*?” Ironically, this remark was not made by a Westerner with Orientalist assumptions, but by an Emirati. While many Emiratis would instantly disagree with that statement, they are still likely to think of their heritage within the confines of the images described above. The scenes of women frying *lugaimat* and men dancing the *yola* are constantly repeated in heritage festivals. They are charming to witness once or twice, but grow stale with each repetition. While the local cultures of the UAE (and wider Gulf) are diverse and varied, the official national narratives often promote a monolithic history with a narrow, standardized set of ideas and images of culture, such as the ones described above.

It is likely that cultural homogeneity is promoted because local diversity is seen as an obstacle to loyalty to the state. Emirati scholar Ali Khalifa stated that “political loyalty to one’s tribe has not as yet given way to loyalty to the state as an abstract political concept.”<sup>1</sup> While tribal affiliations pose some challenges for GCC states, ethnic and cultural diversity may be seen as even more problematic. At the very least, tribes portray images of Bedouins and “pure” Arabs, in line with the image Gulf states often promote. Ethnic and cultural diversity among local citizens, however, indicates that a part of the nation’s history is non-Arab and disputes the storyline of a shared culture and heritage. In attempts to create national cohesion, the

local cultures in the UAE, and much of the Gulf, are portrayed as homogenous, pure, Bedouin, Arab cultures. These monolithic depictions consequently end up sidelining integral parts of *khaleeji* history and culture—such as the Ajami, Baluch, and East African cultures.<sup>2</sup> It is therefore unfortunate, but not surprising, when Emirati citizens believe that their culture is best represented by ahistorical and stereotypical depictions of the *lugaimat* and the *yola*—ones which are not too different from Orientalist depictions of the region.

### Cultural homogeneity and Orientalist depictions

James Onley states that the populations of the Gulf have been historically intermingled with those of the Indian Ocean to the extent that it is difficult to ascertain whether some *khaleejis* are Arabized Persians or Persianized Arabs.<sup>3</sup> These influences are still prevalent today: the Indian Ocean's influence can be found in *khaleeji* food, dialects, and even song and dance. East Africans who were enslaved in the Gulf brought their music with them, and this music has come to represent traditional, local music in the Gulf.<sup>4</sup> However, acknowledgment of this diversity is uncommon. The African influence on *khaleeji* culture is rarely mentioned, and African-influenced music is depicted as Arab.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Clive Holes states that the diversity of the dialects is eroding as Gulf citizens move towards a single standardized *khaleeji* dialect.<sup>6</sup> This standardization often projects a homogeneous and “pure Arab,” Bedouin image which is similar to some of the simplified and Orientalist depictions of the Gulf region.

Meanwhile, it is important to recognize that Ajamis, Baluchs and East Africans (among other groups) have inhabited the Gulf for a long time, and when these cultures are excluded from the national narrative, a large part of the nation's history and heritage is similarly excluded. While GCC states may differ in terms of their portrayals of identity and their citizens' perceptions of it, most of these states homogenize local histories and cultures within their respective national narratives. Neil Partrick argues that the Gulf states have long ignored differences within local society and favored representation of culture and history that fits the national narrative, one which promotes a Bedouin, tribal identity.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Anh Nga Longva states that Kuwaitis define their identity by differentiating themselves from the foreigners within their countries—at times, these “foreigners” are other citizens who are not considered ‘purely’ native.<sup>8</sup> Ernest Gellner states that nationalism, which fuels these perceptions, is spread through a “high culture,” such as that of schoolbooks and newspapers, while Ziad Fahmy finds that nationalism spread in Egypt through what he terms a “medium” culture of audio and television that used local dialects.<sup>9</sup> High and medium cultures, schoolbooks, heritage festivals, and radio are all tools that promote the official national narrative and shape the perceived boundaries of national culture and identity.

### The case of the UAE

When taking the UAE as a GCC-representative case study, one can find many examples of the way social reproductions champion the tribal, Arab narrative. One of the examples comes from the advertisements for the Mleiha archeological sites. Mleiha, a village in Sharjah, has sites dating back some 130,000 years ago.<sup>10</sup> Instead of capturing the essence of the ancient site, the dedicated website, *Discover Mleiha*, strangely describes ancient Mleiha as depicting “traditional Emirati life” and “ancient Bedouin culture.” Clearly, the legacy of the Stone Age hunters represented at this site is neither “traditional Emirati” nor representative of “Bedouin culture.”<sup>11</sup> Whatever the reason may be for the use of this type of language, it is certainly not the only example. Al Bastakiya, a traditional neighborhood in Dubai previously inhabited by Ajami Emiratis originally from Bastak, Iran, has become a prominent tourist attraction. However, its name was changed to Al Fahidi, with the argument that Al Fahidi was the area's original name.<sup>12</sup> The renaming

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of the neighborhood is a further step on the road to homogenous Arabization.

Similarly, festivals, museums, and ‘traditional’ TV shows which aim to reinvent the past center on the Bedouin cultures almost entirely. *The Millionaire Poet*, a TV show for *Nabati* poets, promotes Bedouin poetry, and Qasr Al-Hosn Festival, a major tradi-

tional festival in Abu Dhabi, features activities associated with Arab, Bedouin life, such as falconry and *yola* dances.<sup>13</sup> This is not to say that non-Bedouin backgrounds have been wholly excluded—an Emirati director’s movie on a prominent Emirati Sufi received an award in the UAE, and a popular Ramadan cartoon shown on local channels depicts Ajami Emiratis as central characters.<sup>14</sup> However, these examples are much fewer, and sometimes not as public, as efforts of heritage revival that center on the pure, Arab, Bedouin image. Thus, simplified images that depict a “pure Arab” way of life are often used to embody Emirati identity, while ones that do not fit that criteria—such as the Mleiha sites, or even well-known activities like pearl-diving—are often removed from the context they existed in. What is therefore left to represent Emirati identity are simplified and romanticized Orientalist depictions of a desert life.

### Possible consequences of monolithic representations of identity

Historical accuracy is usually not as influential in informing a national consciousness as national narratives are. While Emiratis are aware that there are many natives of Ajami, Baluch, or East African backgrounds, they do not necessarily view these diverse cultures as representative of Emirati culture and heritage. In fact, some might consider a strong association with them as a form of un-belonging. For example, Partrick cites an Omani analyst who states that Omani minorities, such as the Baluchs, have an incomplete sense of belonging to Oman. The consequence of such exclusivist narratives manifests in the examples of *khaleejis* who downplay their own heritage to fit in with the national narrative. Indeed, Onley found that Emiratis of Ajami background sought to downplay their ethnic roots.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, Sultan Al-Qassemi recounts an unnamed Ajami Emirati who changed his last name to an Arab-sounding name, stating that he witnessed the same phenomenon happening among many other Ajamis and Baluchs.<sup>16</sup>

While Gulf states promote a narrative of homogeneity to create an “imagined community” that bonds citizens to one another, they are simultaneously promoting a narrow and rigid sense of identity that excludes a large part of the nation’s socio- and ethno-historic DNA. These monolithic representations strip the region from countless of its histories, cultures, and stories, giving credence to Orientalist stereotypes that depict the region as lacking in history and culture. The myth of the dearth of history and culture in the Gulf becomes engrained even in the minds of its own citizens: rather than understanding the roles of natives from Ajami, Bedouin, Baluch and East African backgrounds in shaping a local society rich in culture, many start believing that their history and heritage is confined to standardized depictions of the desert, the *lugaimat*, or the *yola*.

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<sup>1</sup> Ali Khalifa, *The United Arab Emirates – Unity in Fragmentation* (London: Croom Helm, 1979), 99.

<sup>2</sup> James Onley, “Transnational Merchant Families in the Nineteenth and Twentieth-Century Gulf,” in *The Gulf Family: Kinship and Politics*, edited by Alanoud Alsharekh (London: Al Saqi Books and London Middle East Institute SOAS, 2007), 37- 56.

- <sup>3</sup> Ibid and James Onley, "Transnational Merchants in the Nineteenth-Century Gulf: The Case of the Safar Family," in *Transnational Connections and the Arab Gulf*, edited by Madawi Al-Rasheed (London, New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 59-89.
- <sup>4</sup> Aisha Bilkhair, "Afro-Emirati: A Unique Historical Experience," *UNESCO*, (2006) and Joseph Braude, "Feature: Africans in the Arabian (Persian) Gulf," *Afropop*, (2007).
- <sup>5</sup> Bilkhair, "Afro-Emirati".
- <sup>6</sup> Clive Holes, "Language and Identity in the Arabian Gulf," *Journal of Arabian Studies* 1:2 (2011): 129-145.
- <sup>7</sup> Neil Partrick, "Nationalism in the Gulf States," LSE Kuwait Programme on Development, Governance and Globalization in the Gulf States, (2009)
- <sup>8</sup> Partrick (2009), and Anh Nga Longva, "Neither Autocracy nor Democracy but Ethnocracy: Citizens, Expatriates and the Social Political System in Kuwait", in *Monarchies and Nations: Globalization and Identity in the Arab States of the Gulf*, edited by Paul Dresch and James Piscatori (London: IBTauris, 2005).
- <sup>9</sup> Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983) and Ziad Fahmy, "Popularizing Egyptian Nationalism: Colloquial Culture and Media Capitalism, 1870-1919" (PhD Diss., University of Arizona, 2007).
- <sup>10</sup> Sabah Jasim, Margarethe Rose Uerpman and Hans-Peter Uerpman, *Mleiha: The Unwritten History* (London: Medina Publishing, 2015).
- <sup>11</sup> Discover Mleiha, <http://www.discovermleiha.ae/>, accessed 28 September, 2016.
- <sup>12</sup> Roland Hawker, "Al Fahidi vs. Al Bastakiya: Who Cares and Why," 6 March, 2016, accessed September 28, 2016.
- <sup>13</sup> Hala Khalaf, "Million's Poet Returns with 48 poets Competing for Dh15 million Prize," *The National, UAE*. 8 February 2016.
- <sup>14</sup> Saeed Saeed, "The animated series Shaabiat Al Cartoon has attracted a lot of fans, and with good reason," *The National, UAE*, 24 August 2011.
- <sup>15</sup> Onley 2004, 2007, *ibid*.
- <sup>16</sup> Sultan Sooud Al-Qassemi, Facebook post, June 27, 2016.