CHAPTER THREE
THE MONTH OF SHA’BAN: SELF AND SPATIAL PREPERATIONS

About two weeks before Ramadan 2008 began I was waiting patiently at a coffee shop for a young woman who had agreed to be interviewed for my research. She was at least half an hour late and when she finally showed up, she came panting and rushing to my table with loads of plastic bags filled (which I later came to find out) with food groceries, new head scarves, loose-fitting dresses and paper announcements of some Ramadan charity activities printed out from the internet. After relaxing for a while she smiled at me apologetically and jokingly said ‘Ana ta’ ban fi Sha’ban ’ or ‘I am tired in Sha’ban ’ to imply that her lateness, and apparent exhaustion, was caused by some important errands she had to run before the holy month began.

The month of Sha’ban is the eighth month of the Islamic calendar right before Ramadan. This month was known as the month of ‘separation’ as the pre-Islamic Arabs used to disperse in search of water. In light of the concept of liminality, rooted in Arnold van Gennep’s book Les Rites de Passage in 1909, the first phase of rituals or rites is ‘separation’ which the author regards as a symbolic action where a person or group are uprooted from a familiar social context and taken into a new one.106 Sha’ban, in this perspective, can be regarded as the first phase of rituals that marks the transition from ordinary space-time to sacred space-time. With the fasting month just around the corner, Sha’ban evidently becomes an exhaustive time of activities that many Muslims undertake to ‘separate’ themselves from the profane and prepare to enter the sacred realm of the holy month. Within the modern context of Cairo, however, the boundaries defining the sacred and profane are not clear-cut but rather blurred as I will illustrate here.

In this chapter I offer a third-person description of the behavior and spatial changes that occur during the month of Sha’ban in Cairo. In the first part I explore upper-middle class Egyptian female youth’s leisure throughout the year and those purifying activities carried out in Sha’ban that allow them to begin Ramadan in a pure mental and physical state. The second part of the chapter will cover both private and public spatial

106 In the ritual phase of ‘separation’ van Gennep notes that it usually involves acts of violence such as circumcision and animal sacrifice. However, this does not apply in the context of Sha’ban in Egypt.
transformations that occur in urban Cairo during Sha’ban. I will also compare the spatial preparatory activities between inhabitants of the affluent parts of Cairo and those of Boulaq, a popular working-class district. It becomes evident that young women’s behavior and leisure settings are altered, to a large degree, to accommodate for the religious and recreation demands of the holy month. I will also show how processes of modernization, such as commercialization and global culture values such as the desire to loose weight, shape that process of transformation as well.

BEHAVIOR TRANSFORMATION

Sha’ban is a crucial time for youth where they prepare to shift from an identity of being the ‘outgoing party animal’ to one that is reflective of a more pious self in Ramadan. This notion of identity shift, opposes what some anthropologists have commonly referred to as a characteristic or group of features to identify as a culture’s symbol of self or a person. This ‘wholesome’ characteristic of identity was usually contrasted to the Western concept of the self as in the work of Geertz (1984) and Marriott (1976). I, however, adopt Ewing’s (1990) and Gregg’s (1998) approach who theorize that people in cultures emit multiple and inconsistent identities that may change according to context. When contexts shifts, actors negotiate identities and seek to achieve specific goals. Certainly when the holy month approaches, youth undergo several behavior transformations that pave the way for achieving a more pious self.

1. Upper-Middle Class Female Youth and their Year-Long Leisure

Egyptian youth’s preparations for Ramadan cannot be explained in a vacuum without consideration of their year-long behavior. To understand and appreciate the importance female youth place on preparing themselves before Ramadan begins, I found it crucial to examine their usual leisure practices throughout the year. In doing so one can see how the women’s behavior patterns changes, to a large extent, to fulfill their quests for more intense piety during the holy month, while minimizing their usual mundane leisure activities.
Upper Class youth’s year-long leisure could be characterized as one of differentiation in choices and hybridization in culture forms. According to Bo Reimer (1995) urban youth in general, as a result of late modernity, are confronted with extensive choices on how to spend their free time. What I observed is that Egyptian youth are not only engaged or confronted by a wide array of leisure service and facilities, but these resources vary extensively in terms of nature. Some forms of leisure, this social group access, are innovations of their generation such as attending Rave parties with Arab-Western themes combined. Other forms of leisure activities common among older generations have been re-invented, such as the modern version of the traditional coffeehouse or *ahwa* (*pl. ahawi*), and there are those traditions that have been discarded. In other words, global leisure culture has been adapted to local circumstances to accommodate local tastes and, simultaneously, local traditional leisure forms are modified to match modern consumer tastes. Leisure for Egyptian youth thus becomes hybrid in terms of blending the local and global together.

The leisure patterns of young women throughout the year can be characterized as mundane in nature, encompassing high consumption. This is reflected in their preferences to dine out, hang out at cafes, to go shopping and in other recreation activities undertaken during summer time. All of the expensive leisure activities and spaces affluent youth access, meets their cosmopolitan high-culture tastes. Their high prices, however, filters out those from lower social stratum. Also some female youth reported that they were interested in culture events and activities such as attending performances at the Cairo Opera House and Sakiat El Sawy Culture wheel. However, only a minority did in fact go to these or similar cultural centers throughout the year; consequently I did not include this leisure category in this section. Finally it is

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107 The Cairo opera house has several theaters that houses world-wide opera, ballet and classical music performances, film festivals and conferences. It also has several art galleries and the Museum of Modern Art. For detailed information on the Opera House’s history and programs, visit [http://www.cairoopera.org/](http://www.cairoopera.org/) Sakiat El Sawy Culture wheel hosts musicians, visual artists, photographers, dancers and stand-up comedians from all over the world. Recently the center has become a popular venue for taking part in national campaigns related to raising awareness on crucial issues such as sexual harassment, driving ethics, water scarcity etc. For detailed information on Sakiat Sawy Culture-wheel’s programs, visit [http://www.culturewheel.com/](http://www.culturewheel.com/)

108 In the next chapter, it will become evident that in Ramadan people dedicated a large part of their leisure time to cultural events or activities that they perceived as ‘authentic’ in nature.
important to note that some female youth did place emphasis on fulfilling and enhancing their religious knowledge and duties throughout the year, even if not quite to the same extent as in Ramadan.

1.1 Religion

Egyptian youth have become more interested in religion in the last few decades. This is certainly related to the growing Islamisation of society which has been taking place since the 1970s. This phenomenon of urban youth’s ‘return’ to enhancing their religious identity does not only apply to Egypt. Ayse Saktanber (2000) research on urban youth in Turkey writes that this social stratum has recently placed more emphasis on improving their religious knowledge and helping those in need. These young adults feel a ‘sense of social distinction attained through their perception of themselves as being on the true path’ (Saktanber 2000: 10).

Many of the upper-class participants in my research assured me that they considered themselves ‘religious’. In elaborating on this form of identification, they noted that they believe in Allah (God) and the Prophets, fast during Ramadan and give zakah (almmsgiving). Some other individuals also stated that they keep the Koran with them at home, in their rooms and cars. Others added that they considered themselves religious by not drinking, eating pork or going to places that serve alcohol. Some of those who admitted that they drank alcohol or did not pray frequently, for example, defined this as a ‘deficiency’ that they need to work on. Urban Egyptian youth have developed an increased interest in attending religious classes, listening to religious preachers and going for congregational prayers at the mosque. Some have also become active members in Islamic philanthropic organizations such as Risala.109

Similar to Linda Herrera’s (2001) research among young women that attend a private Islamic school in Cairo, hybrid identities works amongst upper-middle class female youth in my research as well. They devise their own regulation for pious religious behavior while accommodating their desires to live a modern life. Some examples I

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109 Risala means ‘the message’. It is a highly-respected social organization that works for helping orphans, poor, physically disabled individuals etc. mainly operated by Egyptian youth. See, http://www.resala.org
observed and that were also pointed out in Herrera’s research is that Egyptian youth would listen to pop music as long as they display religious reverence by turning it down on hearing the call for prayers. They would also simultaneously dress up in fashionable clothes and demonstrate modesty by temporarily covering themselves before attending a religious class. As stated earlier, the social or spatial context defined how youth identity shifts between religious and mundane conduct.

1.2 Coffee shops

The traditional coffeehouses or ahawi baladi have become reinvented in urban Cairo into more fashionable up-market types, that mainly caters for the wealthy social groups. Some of the popular cafes that youth frequent in Cairo are Cilantro, Grand Café, Beanos, Starbucks and Coffee Roastery.¹¹⁰ Coffee shops like these have become central urban venues for the social life of many affluent Egyptians. Koning (2005) did an interesting ethnographic research that discusses the emergences of these exclusive public spaces that meet the demands of young upper-middle class Egyptians professionals. As the author observed, up-market coffee shops served as the main leisure venues for young Egyptians.

These cafes greatly vary from the traditional ones. Unlike the ahawi baladi, these up-market cafes are decorated in Western-style interior, have wireless internet connection, serve non-Egyptian snacks like muffins, crepe, and croissant. They also greatly vary on the price level. One Cappuccino may cost up to 15 Egyptian pounds (€2) versus 50 piaster (€0.07) for a cup of coffee at the traditional cafes. These elitist cafes are all air-conditioned and usually have large screens with English and Arabic pop music playing in the background.

Upper-middle class youth are highly attracted to these public leisure venues for various reasons. Some of the reported reasons included their trendy ambiance, food quality and cleanliness. Unlike nightclubs or bars, coffee shops are open all-day long and do not necessarily start late in the evening. Hence, they are more appropriate for the young women with early home curfews (varies between 9 pm to 11 pm) set by their parents. Moreover, I observed that cafes served as ‘acceptable and safe’ places for

¹¹⁰ For insightful information on the location and setting of these cafes, visit www.yallabina.com
meeting friends and potential suitors. In probing more on this issue with some female respondents, I came to learn that since these elitist cafes are alcohol-free and mainly attract wealthy people, the likelihood of meeting a ‘decent’ (in terms of not consuming alcohol) and wealthy man is high.

A new trend for these up-scale coffeehouses are women-only cafes. Nineteen year old Noran studies at the Future University in Cairo, who wears the hijab headscarf, is a regular customer at some women-only cafes. She told me that these cafes are ‘ideal’ for people like herself that wear the hijab or those females who want to relax more without compromising their pious modesty. ‘I can smoke, laugh and talk loudly or even take off my scarf if I wish….without feeling embarrassed, scarred of committing any sins like laughing loudly, attracting unwanted male attention or putting my reputation at stack’ Noran explained. In a press interview, forty-two Marwa Ismail, owner of a women-only café in Nasr city who has suffered tremendously from sexual harassment, said the main reason for initiating that project was that women can be at ‘ease together’ at a convenient, safe and private venue (Sami and El-Naggar, 2007). These recreation venues thus offer women the chance to behave freely without compromising their modesty or safety.

Another increasingly popular venue for hanging out and socializing while enjoying drinks and snacks are out-door cafes. These are non-seated, take-away non-alcoholic bars that serve coffee, juices and all sorts of snacks. They are usually located close to universities, gas stations or at main highway intersections in urban Cairo. These drink-shops are mostly surrounded by cars with youngsters socializing while enjoying their drinks, listening to their favorite songs blasting from their vehicles. They are convenient for many as, unlike most seated coffee shops, no minimum charge is imposed and one is not confined to a seating area. Due to the fact that no minimum charge is set, these snack-cafés may also attract those from lower-middle classes.

1.3 Bars and dance clubs

During the weekends some of the female youth with late or no curfews frequent dance clubs and bars. These night clubs are very expensive where the entrance fee or minimum
charge can go up to 150 Egyptian pounds (€20) per person. Some of the respondents mentioned that their favorite nightclubs were Club 35, Buddha Bar, Latex and La Bodega. Some of these bars are situated on the premises of five-star hotels and all are located in Cairo’s most affluent neighborhoods such as Zamalek. With the exquisite catering and trendy ambiance, these nightclubs are a major contrast to the outside chaotic and conservative mode experienced on Cairo streets.

Alcohol consumption is one key form of recreation at these late night leisure places. Alcohol is mainly consumed by foreigners and males while only a few Muslim females do in fact drink or stated that they do. On discussing alcohol consumption with two upper-class female youth, Maha and Naima, they stated that alcohol is not only forbidden in Islam but culturally inappropriate especially for girls. Naima explained ‘the problem with alcohol is that it makes you loose control over yourself and so a woman (under the influence of alcohol) can teghlat ma’ a wahed (commit a mistake or have sexual relations with a man)….which would bring scandal to her and her entire family’. When I asked her why the risk of ‘loosing control’ was more serious for a woman than a man she replied ‘Come on! It is our culture’. Maha added ‘Yeah! Alcohol is surely bad. Alcohol’s effect and odor stays for a long time. I won’t dare go back to my house and confront my parents with the smell of alcohol on me’. The girls’ views on alcohol made me realize that while upper class women, like Naima and Maha, consider themselves ‘Westernized’ because of their wide exposure and interaction with global culture, they still adhere to certain dominant gender/religious beliefs as evident in their leisure-consumption choices.

Unlike alcohol consumption, many youth girls stated that dancing was one of their favorite pastime activities. The most popular forms of dancing among that social group are disco, oriental dance and salsa. Hanna (1979) notes that dancing is one form of activity that offers humans transient withdrawal from the complex and ever-changing environment with which youth interact and struggle with. This can be recognized in the motivations of the young women I talked to. One female youth summed up her positive experience at nightclubs by stating ‘going to Cairo’s up-scale nightclubs is like stepping into the movie Saturday Night Fever… people are letting go of anxieties while
grooving'. One form of clubbing that has become fashionable among the young upper classes in Cairo is Rave music. Rave parties are commonly held at elitist dance clubs such as Le Pache club in Sharm El Sheikh and several others in Gouna Resort. I attended one Rave party in Halloween 2007 at Sharm El-Sheikh. The age group present ranged between 18 till 25. Almost everyone was dressed in Halloween costumes and spoke English or French. Consumption of alcoholic beverages was high among all attendees regardless of gender. I also witnessed open exchange and usage of drugs. One drug that was widely used was Ecstasy and Speed or as known by many, the ‘Elite’s drugs’ due to their high expense and difficulty in accessing them. As a matter of fact, the entire Rave scene is attached to the image of ‘glamour and prestige…it’s related to fashion and a lifestyle’ (Cairo Times 2002 quoted in Arvizu 2004).

A relatively new music genre that is considered trendy among youth and is closely attached to Rave parties are the re-mixes of classical Arabic music into Western tunes and, also, introducing Arabic instruments into Western songs. The result is an interesting combination of Anglo-Arabic Music. This hybrid type of music has been tactfully tackled in the work of Puig (2006) and Sadek (2006). The authors discussed how Egyptian music has come to incorporate diverse international tastes and preferences. The music has become more cosmopolitan, the authors note, due to the growing Gulf Arab impact, Egyptian labor migration to Europe, increased number of refugees from sub-Saharan Africans and Levantine to Cairo.

At the party I went to, one song that came up and received immense applause and excitement, for example, was for legendary Egyptian Singer Om Khalthoum’s hit song ‘enta omry’ (You are my Life). This song has a new Western version were the

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111 Saturday Night Fever is a 1977 American film starring John Travolta as Tony Manero, a troubled Brooklyn youth whose weekend activities are dominated by visits to a local discothèque.
112 Most of the upper-class youth have either studied or are studying at foreign educational institutes.
113 For an interesting study on drug use among Egyptian youth, see the work of Al-Dabbagh (1996).
background music is ‘fast and lively’, as described by one female respondent. She added that she appreciates the lyrics of Om Khalthoum’s song but ‘gets bored dead’ with its slow rhythm. Thus it can be concluded that music played at Rave parties in Egypt are re-styled into Western and Classical Arabic music to match the taste of its Egyptian-Westernized audience.

In this section it was revealed how Western leisure culture forms impact local culture. Alcohol consumption, rave music, Halloween and associations to American movie (Saturday night fever) have transformed how contemporary affluent Egyptian women spend and experience leisure. Simultaneously, local culture norms and preferences also influence that transformation process. Gender expectations that promote female modesty and discourage consumption of alcohol and staying out late (curfews) dictate which kinds of leisure practices women can take part in. In addition, Egyptian’s preferences for local classical music have motivated Disc Jockeys (DJs) to play old songs, re-styled to modern tastes.

1.4 Malls

Malls have become major city leisure venues for Egyptians. They offer a wide spectrum of recreation options, primarily clothes shopping, restaurants and movie theaters. One of the highly favored and most popular malls in Cairo is City Stars mall situated in Nasr city; it includes international brand names such as Mango, Vero Moda and Zara.114 Malls are preferred among most upper and middle-class Egyptians as they are safer, cleaner and less noisy unlike the chaotic streets of the city. They also offer a feeling of being affiliated with the upper class and of being modern (Abaza, 2006b). The girls I interviewed agreed that they enjoyed the ‘modern atmosphere’ of the malls which they defined as having top-quality Western clothes shops, cafes, and blockbuster American movies at cinemas etc.

One female youth, however, disapproved of the mestawa en-nas (stratum of the people) present at the malls. Similar to many upper-class individuals, the respondent

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114 City Star’s mall official opening was in 2005. Its interior design is inspired by ancient Egypt architecture. Some of the world’s most renowned designer fashion stores exist at this mall.
expressed preference to leisure at venues where the poor do not have access to. ‘At malls, you sometimes see people who look like they just came from the countryside….they are dressed poorly and goggle at the girls in a freaking kind of way’ she explained. Certainly during the weekend days in particular, some of the elitist malls in Cairo become main leisure spots for those from low class strataums. In her research, Abaza (2006b) highlights that malls in Cairo have become touristic sites of attraction for rural Egyptians. Accordingly, security guards at some of the malls may restrict admittance to those who appear poor or violent.

One key point this section revealed, is how the affluent associate the lower-classes with uncivilized manners such as ‘goggling’ at women and, possibly, sexual harassment. Accordingly, they do not represent the ‘authentic’ and sophisticated manners for Egyptians. More on this issue will be tackled extensively in chapter seven.

1.5 Summer vacation

It is important to note that youth attribute high importance to the preparations undergone during the month of Sha’ban due to the fact that Ramadan (during the years fieldwork was conducted for this research) started right after the summer holidays. The summer season for many Egyptian youngsters is the time for relaxation, partying, getting to know new people and romantic dating. Most upper class Egyptians flock to luxurious beach resorts located in the north coast, namely Marina and Agamy that lie within or close to Alexandria city.

Many of the Egyptian tabloid papers cover stories, with photographs, of dancing parties at exclusive beaches and villas at these resorts. Independent newspaper, Ain (August 9, 2007) carried many critical and satirical stories of wealthy teenagers taking
part in ‘Westernized and out-of-control’ theme parties that included dancing in bikinis and alcohol consumption. For example, exclusive Oxygen beach in Agami area held Foam parties, similar to those held in the USA, where girls danced in bikinis and boys and girls mingled freely (Galoosh and El Sebay, 2007). At a similar beach, named La Plage in Marina, I have witnessed a similar atmosphere as described in Oxygen beach (See image 1). Those girls wearing the headscarf were a minority, some people brought their own alcoholic drinks and openly drank it at the beach (no alcohol was sold), many teenagers in swimming costumes danced to Western and Arabic music. As one young female friend told me ‘going to La Plage and Oxygen beaches makes you feel you are not in an Arabic-Islamic country…..everything is Americanized, especially people’s attitudes’. She further expressed feelings of ambivalences in the sense of appreciating Egypt’s openness to the world, and concurrently, disapproving the notion that foreign culture habits posed as a threat to local religious and cultural values.

A phenomenon that has also gained momentum in Egypt is women-only beaches that opened in 2006 in elitist Marina resort on the north-coast. At Yashmak (named after the Turkish face veil) and La Femme beaches the bouncers, DJ, people selling freska (type of sweets mixed with nuts and syrup sold particularly at the beaches in Egypt) and all employees are females. Women are thus free to wear their swimsuits or bikini, tan, swim, even dance to blasting Arabic and English tunes; all away from men's gazes. These beaches allow veiled or religious women to enjoy themselves, look stylish and not feeling guilty for taking off their head-scarves or modest outfits. The advertising poster for Yashmak beach one summer reflects that idea of combining piety with Western-style fashion; it showed a woman whose face and head are covered and who is wearing a stylish-looking bikini. Before the establishment of women-only beaches, veiled women felt obliged not to swim at all or wear what is known as shari‘i swimwear. Similar to women-only cafes, many Muslim women express appreciation towards these female beaches. In their views, these recreation spaces helped resolve their dilemma of enjoying themselves to the optimum (swimming and laughing or dancing freely) without compromising their pious modesty.

\[115\] Shari‘i is a word adopted from Islamic shari‘a and refers to a full-body dress cover.
2. Upper-Middle Class Female Youth and Sha’ban Preparations

In the previous section I have highlighted the key activities that female youth engage in throughout the year. As was noted, most of youth’s free leisure time is dedicated to profane activities such as shopping, clubbing and hanging out with friends. In comparison to the holy month, little time is dedicated to sacred duties such as prayers and charity work. Furthermore, among this social group there were variations in terms of accommodation to religious and cultural rules of modesty in their habitual leisure all year long. This is exemplified in how some youth preferred to spend their leisure time at women-only cafes or beaches while others favored mixed-gender recreation spaces. It thus becomes apparent that youth’s leisure services and spaces are hybrid in nature to match the target market’s diverse cultural tastes and levels of religiosity.

In the month of Sha’ban a large shift in youth’s behavior occurs aimed at minimizing their engagement in profane acts and preparing themselves for the holy month. It is important to note that this shift is multifaceted whereby some preparations are motivated by religious acts and some others by worldly ones such as desire to loose weight. Additionally, Sha’ban for some female youth does not only serve as the time for preparations but also the last chance to enjoy the jollities of life before committing to more strict piety in Ramadan.

2.1 Abstaining from alcohol

As stated previously in chapter two, the consumption of alcohol is prohibited in Islam. Those female youth who did in fact consume alcoholic drinks did so in secret, behind their parents back, and were reluctant in admitting or discussing their drinking habits. I observed that at rave parties and nightclubs a few girls, whom I got closer to through the course of my research, did in fact drink but not as heavily as their male friends.

Before Ramadan begins, many girls try to minimize their outings to nightclubs or late-night parties. One reason for doing so is to ‘vezabato’ (slang Arabic word for fixing oneself) themselves which includes not drinking or being in an environment where alcohol is served. Similar to those Muslims who are in the habit of drinking alcohol,
most female youth preferred to abstain from alcohol forty days in advance to Ramadan since alcohol is presumed to remain in the blood for that time period.

While most people prefer to refrain from consuming alcohol forty days prior to the fasting month, a few others try to make the most out of it before Ramadan begins. Three weeks before the holy month starts I got many invitations to house parties that included the availability of alcohol. One party hosted by a 22 year old male at his villa on the outskirts of Cairo was titled ‘Akher Forsah’ or ‘Last Chance’ to imply last chance for partying, drinking and freely mixing with the opposite sex before the holy month starts.

Most restaurants that are owned by Muslims and serve alcohol usually stop serving alcoholic beverages in Sha`ban and particularly during the holy month. Those restaurants that in fact do serve alcohol during the holy month do so only to foreigners or non-Muslims. During Ramadan and special Muslim occasions, such as the birth of the Prophet, the sale of alcoholic beverages is forbidden by the Egyptian law except to foreigners or non-Muslims. Any bar or restaurant not abiding to this law runs the risk of having its operation license revoked. Accordingly, waiters and restaurant managers may sometimes ask a customer ordering alcohol during the fasting month or other religious occasions for their passport or National ID to ensure they are non-Muslims.

2.2 Replacing revealing outfits with modest ones

About a week before Ramadan started I went over to Maha’s, a 20 year old female studying at the British University in Cairo, as she asked me to help her out fill a travel visa application. When I stepped into her bedroom I was shocked with the chaotic state her room was in. All her wardrobe doors were opened wide and piles of clothes were lying on the floor. Seeing my astonished facial expression, Maha quickly explained to me that she was re-arranging her closet by putting aside tight-revealing outfits and bringing out the more loose-fitting and ‘Ramadan-appropriate’ clothes. Half-jokingly Maha bid farewell to her fashionable designer clothing and welcomed a new set of conservative outfits that included ankle-length *gallabiyyas* (traditional Middle-Eastern garment) and modest prayer shawls. The main criteria for an outfit to be modest or
mohtashem, according to Maha and many other girls, is that it should not be transparent or revealing the body figure. A few others added that a mohtashem outfit should be dark and non-glossy in color so as not to attract male attention.

Some girls who do not wear the hijab or headscarf throughout the year prefer to adopt it in Ramadan. A rough percentage indication of girls that take on headscarf in Ramadan is about 30%. In Sha`ban many girls shop for headscarves or borrow some from female friends or family. I also observed that some of the girls who did wear the hijab throughout the year preferred to wear a different type during the holy month. During the year they wore what they referred to as the ‘Spanish’ or ‘Gypsy’ hijab, whereby the scarf is tied like a bandana, so that the knot is fastened at the back of the head and the neck is uncovered. In Sha`ban they put away these kinds of Spanish-type scarves and substitute them for the more traditional ones that entirely cover the head/hair, chest and shoulders. It would, however, be a mistake to interpret the preference for modest-loose dress solely in terms of piety, but rather to conceal over-weight issues as well.116 For some women, their choices to dress up conservatively have little to do with religion or, let alone, Ramadan.

2.3 Setting a diet and exercise plan

Upper-class girls attribute great importance to physical appeal. When I asked Rahma, how she benefits from fasting during Ramadan she replied that one of the positive things it offers her is the motivation and opportunity for losing weight and getting fit. For almost all the female youth I talked to, maintaining fitness is not only inspired by health reasons but also related to self-esteem and attracting the opposite sex. Their continuous exposure to images of beautiful women with model-like figures on MTV (music channel) and other Western and Middle-eastern media vehicles tempts them to work hard to look as appealing as some celebrities. In line with Eum (2005) research, it became evident

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116 Twenty-year old respondent (named Rahma), for example, does not wear the hijab and leads a non-traditional lifestyle as she defines it. She smokes cigarettes, stays out late and goes out on romantic dates. Yet she prefers to dress in loose fitting outfits that do not expose her bodily figure and chooses not to wear a bathing suit all year long. Adopting this dress-style does not have to do with piousness but more with her over-weight problem she explained. ‘Wearing tight clothes will look disgusting and is simply unattractive’ she said. Modest and conservative outfits, she explained, for a ‘chubby’ person like herself is more suitable and carries esthetic qualities of simplicity that she values.
that part of Cairo’s youth endeavors to mirror the fashion or looks of their favorite artists’
entails high consumption patterns.

Twenty-year old Rahma, for example, enjoys shopping for clothes, make-up and
accessories to match those worn by her favorite female stars. Lobna, her friend, jokingly
adds that Rahma is ‘obsessed’ with looks as she hopes to land herself a ‘good husband’.
Rahma teases back by saying ‘with what guys are seeing on television all day, women
like Nancy Agram and Elissa (Lebanese pop stars), do you think they’d settle for a
woman with a big belly’. This statement made the entire group of girls I was sitting with
at the sporting club, crack up laughing and tease one another about past failed
relationships and useless diet plans. Since most females in this age-group place high
emphasis on appearance and fashion, they go through endless struggles to loose weight
and maintain fitness.

Thus in Sha’ban girls like Rahma allocate some of their free time to exchange
information on diet and exercise tips that assist in weight loss. Through e-mails
 correspondence, internet chat rooms, joining groups on social networking websites like
Facebook and casual conversations, girls learn about specifically tailored diet and
exercise plans that match a Ramadan lifestyle. The diet plans adopted outline the
suggested amount of food intake recommended at the time of breaking the fast and sahur.
Almost all of the diet plans adopted by women warn against the over-consumption of the
all time famous Ramadan sweet desserts.

Some of the girls also preferred to follow a diet plan under the supervision of a
professional medical doctor. A practicing dietician told me that right before and during
Ramadan women flock to her health and nutrition center in large amounts, compared to
other months of the year. The doctor explained that most of her Muslim patients believe
that it is easier for them to loose weight during the holy month since they are fasting for
long hours during the day. Thus, they come to her clinic in Sha’ban to consult with her
and together agree on a Ramadan diet plan that will work best for them. The doctor
repeatedly stressed that it was particularly crucial for people conducting the fast during
Ramadan to follow a diet plan with a medical doctor. Fasting all day and failing to eat
healthy, compensatory meals to make up for the lost nutrients all day may cause serious
health risks, she explained. She recited to me numerous incidents of young girls so
desperately wanting to lose weight, were rushed to her clinic for immediate treatment due to malnutrition.

Since work and school hours are cut down during the holy month, many of the female respondents found it easier to allocate time for exercise. In Sha’ban, I witnessed frequent discussions between girls on setting up group-exercise programs to be followed in Ramadan. Members at similar sporting clubs scheduled meeting times to go jogging or walking at the club. These kinds of information were also exchanged via e-mails and social network websites. Many of the girls preferred to exercise during the last few hours before the iftar meal so as to get their minds off fasting. Some other preferred to set exercise schedules that start after iftar is over to help burn off the high-calorie meals and sweets consumed then. The next chapter will discuss in detail women youth exercise experiences during the holy month.

Besides setting an exercise schedule, some women bid farewell to some of their favorite sports during Sha`ban. Three interviewees pointed out that in Sha`ban they enjoy last swimming strokes before the fasting month starts. They considered it haram in Ramadan to wear bathing suits as they are tight and expose their body parts. The same perspective applies to sport-costumes worn at gymnastics and ballet that some perceived as tight, revealing and inappropriate for Ramadan. Due to lack of demand, swimming and gymnastics classes are put to a halt during the holy month at most sporting clubs in Cairo.

2.4 Arranging study and work-related tasks

During Sha`ban most students and employees are stressed trying to accomplish as much work as possible and, eventually, finalize important assignments before the start of the sacred month. In Ramadan, the work and study pace noticeably decreases mainly because official work hours are minimized, more time is dedicated to Ramadan-related spiritual and late-night mundane activities. In addition, a few people find it challenging to concentrate on work matters while fasting.

Accordingly, some students in Sha`ban get together and outline a ‘Ramadan Study schedule’ specifying the names of those expected to attend (or skip) the lectures
and a plan on how the notes taken during the lectures will be circulated among them. The schedule also sometimes includes setting appointments for study-groups to meet and review notes in the evening. The main objective for this ‘pre-Ramadan project’ is to ensure that each member is granted more free time during the holy month for other activities.

Some students however oppose these special-study Ramadan arrangements. They believe that for one to have his/her fast completed, one must attend all lectures, study hard and not be lazy. Others find that fasting makes them concentrate better in their studies as it purifies their minds from thinking of distractive material or worldly things such as shopping and romance. Thus they found that Ramadan did not require any kind of study preparations.

Furthermore, employees working at international organizations and dealing with foreign stakeholders are also very keen in finalizing imperative business deals in Sha’ban. Some business people postpone international trips or visits until the holy month ends. At some of the companies I worked for, all essential finance matters with the accounting office were settled before Ramadan started. From experience, we realized that the accountants may make numerous mistakes when they were processing payments or finalizing budgets during fasting time.

2.5 Body cleansing

Muslims believe that fasting becomes only valid when one is in a ritually pure state. To attain that purity, girls dedicate some effort and time in purifying or cleansing their bodies, especially before the holy month starts. The cleansing or nazafa tasks they undertake mainly include body-scrubbing, body waxing and trimming or cutting their hair.

Body scrubbing relieves one from dry and dead cells, which gives the girls a feeling of refreshment and revitalization. These sensations help them feel more prepared to welcome the sacred month with all the religious activities they plan to get involved in. Unlike the public bath or hammam Moroccan women go to as described in Buitelaar’s research (1993), Egyptian upper middle class girls do the cleansing themselves, hire
someone to do the job at home or go to professional beauty centers. Girls interviewed noted that it was of utmost importance to carry out the cleansing tasks before Ramadan, as it was nearly impossible to have them done during the holy month. They explained that it was haram to expose their bodies to strangers (including women), even if it was for the purpose of waxing or body-scrubbing. I spoke to Zeinab, a woman who has been in the profession of body waxing for over 20 years, who affirmed that business for her goes down to more than 50% during the holy month. She added that those clients that continue to wax during the holy month only remove hair from their arms and legs (up till the knees) and not the private parts of the body. Sha’ban, however, served as the peak business season for Zeinab.

Many of the interviewees said that most of the good hair-stylists that they regularly go to are men. They consider it haram to have a man touch their hair during Ramadan and therefore carried out all things related to hair trimming and dying in Sha’ban. What I observed, however, was that some girls do continue to go to the hair-stylists in Ramadan, but only after iftar time. As will be discussed in the next chapter, Ramadan is full of social events and leisure outings that almost all occur after iftar time outside the home domain. Therefore, many girls find it an absolute necessary to look good, including their hair-do, when they go out and socialize with family and friends after iftar. Moreover, many girls think that their fast will be broken if a male hair-stylist massages/touches their hair while washing or styling. Thus it comes as no surprise to learn that most hair-salons at elite quarters in Cairo are over-loaded with women customers about two or three hours after iftar time.

2.6 Making up for missed fasting days

Sha’ban offers the last opportunity for one to make amends for those days missed fasting during the previous Ramadan. Reasons for having missed fasting days include illness, travels (especially long-haul) and menstruation for women. Among upper-class girls, one common reason for having missed fasting last Ramadan was due to a leisure/business trips abroad, especially to non-Muslim countries. They explained that they find it too much of a challenge to abstain from food or water when everyone around them is not
They added that on business trips they are usually overloaded with work, which makes it tough to accomplish all work-assignments and maintain concentration while fasting. Twenty-one year old Sana, employee at a publications company, explained to me for example how she finds it extremely difficult to fast when she travels every year to the Frankfurt book fair. ‘The atmosphere at the fair is super active. Everyone is in a rush to make business deals and to be honest I find it nearly impossible to conduct business and keep my energy level high, while fasting’.

2.7 Making up with past adversaries

Some key virtues of Ramadan is believed to be forgiveness and unity among Muslims. According to many respondents some of the key qualities of the Prophet that they try to live up to is forgiveness and kindness to others. Entering Ramadan without trying to reconcile with past adversaries is not desirable. Many individuals thus try to resolve past unsettled quarrels or issues to enter the sacred month with a clear conscience. As one individual told me, Ramadan offers one a golden opportunity to make-up with people, as it creates a ‘window’ for approaching those you want to reconcile with. She explained that the holy month is the best occasion to contact people, for example to wish them a happy Ramadan through telephones, mobile text messages or e-mails. Besides, since it is the time for forgiveness, hardly anyone can refuse to resolve issues and make-up. One respondent told me that the rare times she calls her sister, whom she regularly has ‘serious clashes’ with is right before Ramadan starts as she knows that she will not be let down.

2.8 Relationships with the opposite sex

Many of the girls that are involved in romantic relationships, excluding engagement or marriage, prefer to end or put their relationships on hold until Ramadan is over. Other girls prefer having serious discussions with their boyfriends explaining that they can continue going out during the holy month but need to stop holding hands or engage in any physical affectionate gestures. One girl who noted that she was ‘terribly in love’ with
her boyfriend and finds it hard to put her relationship on hold during Ramadan. Yet she is worried that they may ‘accidentally’ hold hands/kiss during the holy month. She remedies that by insisting that she and her boyfriend only meet in group-outings and never be left alone together in a secluded or private area. She added that ‘it is known that when a boy and a girl are alone in a room they are accompanied by the devil, however, in a public area (where one is surrounded by many people) that devil is chained’. Thus during Sha’ban many girls carry out serious conversations with their partners to set new limits on how they should interact during the holy month.

2.9 Internet-related activities

Upper-middle class female youth generally make wide use of the internet in matters related to their studies, recreation and social networking. Before Ramadan starts, some women prefer to access the internet for other issues, principally those related to religious information. They go through the many Islam-related websites recommended by friends, family, university newspapers and their favorite magazines. They check information on Ramadan related issues such as how to conduct ‘proper’ charity, fasting and other activities; some also engage in interactive Islamic forum chat rooms. Some of the highly favored websites mentioned are www.islamicfinder.org; www.al-islam.com/eng; www.islamonline.net. These and similar websites are added and prioritized on their computers’ ‘favorite lists’, while social chatting and dating websites are removed or put aside. Some other sources, such as celebrity news websites are deleted as they usually contain sexually-suggestive images or information. One girl I interviewed mentioned that she knows of a friend who un-subscribes to internet membership before the holy month starts to ensure that she and her family members do not access, even by mistake, sexual content widely spread over the internet.

117 Umar ibn al-Khattab narrated that the Prophet said: ‘Whenever a man is alone with a woman the Devil makes a third’ hadith Ahmad and al-Tirmidhi 3118.
Facebook and Hi5, social utility websites, were mentioned as the most common websites for sharing announcements on Ramadan lectures, philanthropic activities, diet plan etc. Under the group of ‘religion and spirituality’ I found numerous sub-groups that deal with Ramadan, such as collecting donations for food packages, announcing religious lectures, recommendations on fasting, prayers etc.

Part of getting into the ‘spiritual mood’ of the holy month is downloading religious ringtones, mobile interfaces and computer desktop screens. These downloads are usually found on the internet. Girls replace their usual pop songs ringtones with tunes that say ‘Allahu Akbar’ (similar to the call for prayers) and Sami Youssef’s religious songs. Some youth also preferred to replace their cellular phones interface, computers’ desktop picture and/or screen-saves and profile photos on social utility websites that commonly carried pictures of themselves, partners, families and favorite stars, with religious phrases or symbols. Some of the interfaces I saw carried phrases like Allahu Akbar and Ramadan Karim.

Furthermore, I observed that some people resort to the internet to learn beforehand of the upcoming Ramadan-tailored soap operas, entertainment shows and restaurants offering special iftar and sahur meals during the holy month. Some youth access the website www.yallabina.com and similar entertainment ones to prepare themselves better for rather the profane leisurely aspect of Ramadan.

3.0 Books, magazines and posters

Female youth’s home library is also readjusted before the holy month begins. Reading leisurely books and magazines were noted as one of upper class women youth favorite activity throughout the years. Some of the books and magazines mentioned that matched a number of the girls’ interests were intellectual, cultural and scientific related. For example, some of the international magazines mentioned were Newsweek and National Geographic. Written material that is academic or intellectual in nature is left in place, yet

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118 Some mobile melodies and interfaces can also be purchased through dialing 0900. These numbers are very expensive and may go up to five times in cost more than the usual price per minute.
those books or lifestyle magazines that have sexually-suggested illustrations or writings are put aside.

Some of those mentioned material that were put back into storage were romance novels and magazines such as Cosmopolitan, Elle, Okay! and other tabloid magazines. Some of the names of Egyptian produced gossip magazines that were also removed comprised of Flash, *el-Maw‘ed* (The Date), Charisma, Cleo and Enigma. Finally some girls decide to pull down posters of their favorite male actors in Sha’ban. These items are instead replaced with books and CDs of more religious nature.

Similar to the internet, I observed that some female youth purchased lifestyle Arabic magazines in Sha’ban to learn of the upcoming Ramadan television shows. They discussed among themselves reviews they have read about the plots and actors starring in forthcoming Ramadan soap operas. Therefore, it is important to stress that youth use print and technology mediums to not only learn about religious-related matters but mundane ones as well.

**SPATIAL TRANSFORMATION**

Youth undergo various preparation rituals to help purify their bodies and minds for the sacred month. Preparations extend to private and public spaces as well to include thorough house cleaning, removal of obscene street posters or advertisements and public sermons at various venues. Spatial transformations are not only inspired by religious incentives but also by profane ones such as food shopping and decorations to celebrate Ramadan. The following section will include those preparatory activities that are not necessarily conducted by upper-middle class youth themselves, but are part of their dynamic contextual environment which they directly interact with. In addition, to highlight spatial preparatory variations between social classes, I will include Boulaq district in my analysis.

3. **Private Space: Home Domain**

The home becomes an important leisure venue during Ramadan for sharing meals, inviting guests over and, generally, spending quality time with loved ones as we shall see
in the next chapter. Accordingly, the month of Sha`ban becomes an important time to clean and decorate the house and stock it with food commodities to welcome the festive nature of the month.

3.1 Cleansing and re-arranging items

If you would ask any hired cleaning lady working in Cairo which time of the year she is instructed by her employer to conduct thorough cleaning she would say either during Sha`ban or before a big celebration is held at the household such as an engagement party. Particularly in the last week of Sha`ban, household owners hire extra labor or pay their servants extra money to ensure that the house is cleaned thoroughly and ready for Ramadan. Although, most upper-middle class housewives do not do the cleaning themselves, they prefer to stay home and supervise the ‘intensified’ house purifying process.

In general, cleaning includes dusting all the furniture, curtains, carpets and mobbing and scrubbing of the floors. Top-notch polishing equipments and cleaning agents are purchased and used beforehand to ensure that the house is spotless and looking at its best. Kitchen utensils are also thoroughly cleaned and day-to-day cutlery is sometimes replaced by grand silverware. Quality and expensive carpets, decorative statues and other house decorations are taken out of the storage and placed carefully in the house. For Muslim Egyptians, Ramadan is the special time for inviting people over for *iftar* and *sahur* meals and, accordingly, many find it crucial to serve and impress guests with the best material goods available in a meticulously clean house.

Finally, in a few cases, artistic sculptures or portraits of semi-nude/nude figures are removed at that time of the month. Removal of those visuals are carried out to honor the purity of the month, bless the fast and as a gesture of respect for those guests who are devout or strict Muslims. Thus, in the context of Ramadan meanings associated with artistic material with sexually explicit visuals shifts. They become perceived as obscene and disrespectful rather than work of creativity.
3.2 Decorating with the *fanus*

One important task that people make sure to accomplish before Ramadan starts is buying and hanging/placing a large *fanus* (pl. *fawanis*) lantern inside the house. The *fanus* of Ramadan is a unique symbol for the holy month to Muslims in Egypt.

The *fanus* of Ramadan has passed from generation to generation, and its Egyptian tradition is mired in its own set of circulated stories about its origin. It is believed that the *fanus* was introduced by the Fatimids (Abdel Aziz, 1987). One story recites that in the year of the Hejira 362 AD, Al-Muizz li-Din Allah al-Fatimi arrived to Egypt one night in the month of Ramadan, where he was greeted by people carrying lanterns. Another story claims the *fanus* was used by Egyptian Muslims to light their way in the dark, as they walked in a procession to greet the holy month. One tale also states that the lanterns, made of scrap metal and glass with candles inside, were used to light the front porches of the houses of the wealthy people during the Fatimid rule. Another popular narrative accounts that the lanterns were used by young boys to escort women out into town in Ramadan, as they were not allowed to leave their homes during any other time of the year. The *fanus* was thus used to inform the men of the city of the arrival of a woman so that they would not cross-path and so assure that the woman would not be subject to any kind of harassment (Abdel Aziz, 1987).

Today the *fanus* is associated with the popular image of children playing out in the streets during Ramadan, happily swinging their *fawanis* and singing a nonce rhyme in colloquial Egyptian Arabic which was composed by Ahmed Sherif, who is one of the most renowned Arab music writers and composers. The song goes like this:

*Wahawi ya Wahawi* (metaphorically meaning the light of fire) *Iyuha* (an unknown word which is used to rhyme in between) *Ruht ya Sha’ban* (you have gone, O Sha’ban referring to the month before Ramadan) *Wi Geet ya Ramadan* (You have gone, O Ramadan) *Iyuha* *Bint el Sultan* (The daughter of the Sultan) *Iyuha* *Labsa el Guftan* (Is wearing her caftan) *Iyuha* *Yalla ya Ghaffar* (For God the forgiver) *Iduna el Idiya* (Give us this season’s gift) Yalla ya Ghafar.

Regardless of age, the lantern is perceived as an important symbol for Ramadan that prepares one mentally and psychologically for the coming of the holy month. One youth respondent said that the presence of the lantern and its light or ‘*nur*’ helps her prepare
better for Ramadan by remembering that the holy month is around the corner and its essence is on purity ‘of the heart and mind’ and piety just like the ‘nur’ of the lamp. The lantern also provides the festive ‘feel’, ‘ambience’ or gaww of Ramadan that people look forward to every year. For some children, the lantern is a source of pride. Children would invite one another to show off the new large or expensive lantern that their dad bought them in the house. For the older generation, the presence of the house lantern is regarded as an important symbol of tradition practiced every year. One retired man I had a casual conversation with one day told me that since he was a child his dad would bring one big house lantern every Ramada. Half laughingly he told me how every Ramadan he and his sisters and brothers would impatiently wait every Sha`ban for their dad to arrive with the new fanus. This Egyptian tradition, not practiced in any other Muslim country, continues to the present day.

While commonly fathers bring their children a fanus, it has become popular for the husband, fiancé or boyfriend to bring his female partner a big fanus. One teenage girl explained to me that similar to Valentine where the man brings his partner red roses, in Sha’ban it is ‘expected’ for him to bring his girlfriend a fanus. Sometimes the man would ask the fanus-maker to paint his initials on the fanus in the case that it was brought by a boyfriend and not a fiancé or husband. The ‘romantic fanus’ is taken back home, usually hidden out of sight (depending on size and whether the boyfriend’s name is inscribed on it) or claimed to be from another female friend so as to avoid parental interrogation.

It became apparent that the people attach sentimental and pious meanings to the Ramadan lantern. The fanus is a source of national pride for Egyptians and, also, a marker of wealth. Finally, similar to a Western love celebration (Valentine’s Day), a new kind of fanus has become invented in modern times, the romantic fanus.

3.3 Protecting from the evil eye

It is perceived by some that even though during Ramadan the ‘devils are chained’ one is not safe from the malevolent, evil or envious gaze of other human beings. Regardless of social class, people that adhere to this belief state that the evil-eye is found in Islamic
doctrine, based upon the verse of the Koran in *surat al-Falaq* 113:5, ‘And from the evil of the envier when he envies’, and the statement of Prophet Muhammad in a *hadith*, ‘The influence of an evil eye is a fact.’ Especially in Ramadan when many guests are invited over for meals and are exposed to the ‘best’ material goods provided by the host, one has to secure oneself from an envious guest who may cause an (un)intentional evil-eye.

Generally, people noted that the most effective protection against the evil-eye is the Koran or the words of God. The ‘words of Allah are the purest of all’ that calms the *nafs* or soul, shields one from bad luck and secures from *el-`ein el-wahsha* (evil-eye) as commonly referred to among Egyptians. When the words of God are present or invoked, divine intervention is believed to take the forms of established success and prosperity, protection against misfortune, and protection from the jealousy of others (Starrett, 1995). Hence, most people prefer to start the purification, or rather protection, processes in Sha`ban by playing Koran recitations and/or hanging Koran script frames on the house walls.

Some protection shields against the evil-eye besides the words of the Koran are the *khamsa* (meaning five, a hand-shaped amulet), blue turquoise stone, and *bokhor* incense. I interviewed a *bokhor*-seller in an old headquarter in Cairo. He affirmed that *bokher* sales reach a peak in Sha`ban and Ramadan. He explained this boost in sales by saying that Egyptians view the *bokhor* as a source of *baraka* or blessing that is part of the Ramadan celebration. The intense smell of the *bokhor* is also believed to dispel evil spirits, ward off the envious eye of a jealous or malevolent person and bring good luck.

The Egyptian affluent groups usually criticize those from the lower-classes for upholding superstitious beliefs that are not based on reason. The affluent social classes justified their belief in the evil-eye by assuring me that it is referenced in the Koran and, accordingly, can not be labeled as a superstitious belief. Koranic scripts as sources of protection from the evil-eye were also perceived as unrelated to credulous beliefs. In relation to the *khamsa*, blue stone and *bokhor*, not explicitly mentioned in the Koran, they stated that they purchased them for their aesthetic qualities. However, in probing further
it became evident that some upper-middle class respondents shared the same superstitious views as the lower classes. Some partially (if not completely) believed that the *khamsa*, blue stone and *bokhor* acted as protection shields from the evil-eye. This demonstrates the ambivalences that are entangled with identity and social class, as will be further elaborated on in chapter seven.

3.4 Food shopping

Before Ramadan starts one frequently overhears women asking one another whether they have already done their Ramadan shopping or purchased ‘*lawazem Ramadan*’ or Ramadan necessities. These shopping items mainly include all basic ingredients to bake the popular Ramadan cuisine specialties such as sugar, wheat, poultry, honey, fruits, nuts, oil, eggs, lentils, chickpeas, beans etc.

As observed, the preferences towards traditional Egyptian or Middle-Eastern cuisine and beverages are stronger in Ramadan than any other times of the year (see Glossary for a brief description of the most popular Ramadan food dishes and drinks). Traditional Ramadan delicacies are perceived by many Egyptians as a key factor in helping to create the special ‘*ta’am*’ or taste of the holy month. Many women put aside the day-to-day meal snacks that they and their families enjoy eating all year long such as cereal, pancakes, muffins etc. and makes space in their kitchen cabinets for the recently purchased Ramadan food/drink ingredients.

Muslim families tend to allocate a large budget for Ramadan shopping for two reasons. First Ramadan is viewed as the time for conspicuous food consumption that accentuates the festive nature of the month. Secondly, with the sudden increase in demand for all food ingredients as the holy month approaches, prices rise considerably. For low-income households the increase in price of almost all Ramadan food commodities poses as a serious strain. This has particularly been the case in recent years with Egypt's deteriorating economy, marked by a weak currency in combination with additional Ramadan leisure expenses, school/universities tuition and the fact that families...
just returned from summer vacation where they spent a lot of money.\footnote{120 Education institutes in Egypt starts in September which is about the same time that Ramadan begins in recent years. Parents are expected to pay the full or semester tuition beforehand.} All of these factors put many Egyptian Muslims in an unsustainable economic situation.

As a result, those with low-incomes resort to purchasing in bulk Ramadan food items at low-priced wholesale stores or at government subsidized food stores. Some others use cheaper substitutes to bake some popular dishes such as using home-made syrups instead of mass-produced honey. Also, many commercial companies provide their junior employees in Sha’ban with complimentary food packages that include the basic commodities as a gesture of generosity.

4. Public Space

In this section it will be shown how the public sphere is transformed to accommodate for religious, commercial and festive demands of the holy month. It is interesting to observe how these various, and sometimes conflicting, demands are blended together at some public venues.

4.1 Greetings, commercial and social advertising

To welcome Ramadan, mosques, social organizations, profit organizations and public figures set up street banners carrying greetings to the Muslim community on the advent of the blessed month. These banners range from cheap cloth to mega sized quality billboard erected in Cairo streets. Some of these banners have write-ups such as ‘Ramadan Mubarak’, ‘Ramadan Karim’ and wishes for a successful performance of the fast. Some other write-ups include reminders on the virtues of Ramadan such as forgiveness and mercy. Finally, some banners comprise of phrases that emphasize the health and social values of Ramadan fasting and charity.

These announcements or greetings are not only restricted to street banners, but include inserts in newspapers and magazines. Moreover, some of these announcements are posted in public areas and transportation systems in the forms of stickers. Inside the
compartments of the underground railway system, I saw plenty of stickers carrying Ramadan greetings. The stickers randomly placed in the women’s compartments are not only restricted to greetings but may include reminders on the importance of praying, fasting, veiling and modesty. No sponsor name appears on these stickers as it is forbidden, in the first place, to put any kind of announcements in public transportation. Some passengers also criticize these ‘religious’ stickers as they state that Islamic teaches advises against ‘damage’ to the environment or public surrounding.

Those write-ups that include the name(s) of the sponsors and organization’s logo act as promotional tool to help them win credibility and endorse their commercial or political interests. Famous Egyptian politicians and businessmen are known to deliberately run these Ramadan greeting announcements every year especially during the time when the start of the holy month coincides with a new service or product they are offering or the launch of a new campaign. Moreover, those companies or public figures who are subjected to rumors of fraud or any form of negative publicity are keen to place Ramadan greetings announcements.

Some of the interviewees pointed out that they are particularly impressed when they see American/Western companies post these Ramadan announcements. It shows that ‘these non-Egyptian and non-Muslim’ companies respect the religion and culture of the country they operate in, as one respondent said. Other people believed that when multinationals companies post announcements they are motivated solely by promotion purposes.

Commercial advertisements and sales promotions also start to intensify remarkably during this month (See image 2). These mainly include consumer-goods products, such as cooking oil and dairy products the demand of which reaches peak in
Sha`ban and Ramadan. Various kinds of sales promotions techniques are applied by companies to stimulate market demand for their commodities, particularly at that time of intense competition, such as coupons, price deals when a large quantity is purchased, contests and free gifts.

Free gifts come in various forms based on the nature of the commodity and target market. Companies that sell food products commonly place inserts in lifestyle magazines of some delicious Ramadan recipes that requires the usage of their brand item or ingredients. For example, Greenland (one of the leading dairy products company in Egypt) starts placing recipe inserts in the month of Sha`ban in Kul el- Nas (All People) magazine. Another popular type of promotion tool marketers resort to is the insertion of complimentary CDs in magazines with downloadable Ramadan special mobile ring tones and Koran calligraphy scripts that can be uploaded on the computer or mobile phone.

Advertisements announcing new television programs to be aired during the holy month are also launched during the month of Sha`ban. Driving around Cairo streets a month before the holy month starts, one is struck with the immense numbers of television advertisements, especially at frequently trafficked intersections. These programs include new soap operas, comedy shows and religious ones. Amr Khaled’s religious program on Iqraa (read) channel is one of the most highly promoted show in Sha`ban.

Public service advertisements also increase immensely in the month of Sha`ban, informing, educating and motivating the public about non-commercial issues. Social organizations, for example, launch announcements asking people to donate money, clothes or any basic necessities for the needy. These announcements appear on many media vehicles including billboards, print media, internet and television. Most of public posts appear in religious-oriented publications, websites and television channels. Some famous social service television advertisements that started airing in Sha`ban for three consequent years are the ones for raising funds for the Children Cancer Hospital in Cairo and poor children from upper-Egypt.

An interesting observation in Sha`ban 2009 that I have not witnessed before is the erection of religious street signs carrying phrases like ‘Remember Allah’ and ‘Remember He (Allah) is watching you’, ‘You may meet Him (Allah) now’. These signs are placed right next to private beaches, especially those that are subject to wide
opposition because of the reported obscenities that occur there. They also stand side by side to commercial billboards advertising brand names like Pepsi and Costa Coffee shop.

As presented, Ramadan greetings/announcements are motivated by pious, philanthropic and promotional motives. As will be explained further in chapter five on piety, one’s niya or intention for performing a religious activity plays a key role in validating its purpose.

4.2 Commercial outlets: food, lanterns and Islamic commodities

A common scene during Sha’ban is the presence of a large number of people flocking supermarkets. I have witnessed immense crowds and often quarrels between people waiting to place their orders at special Ramadan food stands. These booths are specifically erected at this time of the year, inside supermarkets’ premises, to cater for the large demand of basic food commodities. They are usually decorated in Arabic calligraphic decorations, have Koran recitations playing in the background and the employees are dressed in traditional Egyptian outfits.

A common scene observed in the public sphere are street vendors selling the highly demanded lanterns or fawanis Ramadan. During the last few days before Ramadan arrives, children become excited and are more insistent on having a fanus. In fact, most of them can hardly wait to start swinging the fanus and singing with other children. That’s why, few weeks before Ramadan, Old Cairo’s alleys are transformed into workshops for tinsmiths to produce as many fawanis as possible. The high demand on the lanterns before the start of the holy month has transformed the traditional lantern into a profit-making commodity. A fanus usually ranges between 15 and 30 LE (€ 2 and 4) but there are more expensive ones that can go up to E300 (€40). Besides the Egyptian-made fawanis, today there are Chinese-made plastic ones that do not only play the traditional Ramadan song of Ahmed Sherif, but also other modern Arabic pop music.

Ibrahim, a street vendor I interviewed, proudly showed me the wide collection of fawanis on display in his store. He called each fanus type according to the name of the Arabic artist who performs the song echoed from the lantern. So there were fawanis named: Nancy (Nancy Ajram), Ragheb (Ragheb Alama) and Amoorah (Nickname for
Amr Diab) after the names of renowned contemporary Arabic pops singers. Ibrahim added that the ‘Nancy fanus’ was not only named after Nancy Ajram’s song echoed from the fanus, but also because of its feminine shape. The fanus’s shape was round and curvy like a female’s figure.

Even though Ibrahim does not sell other commodities except fawanis, other vendors sell sawarekh (firecrackers) but in a discreet manner. The manufacturing and trade in fireworks and other forms of petty explosives or el-bomb is deemed illegal in Egypt (Khattab, 2006). These products have caused numerous injuries and even claimed lives of manufacturers and users alike. Yet these illicit petty explosives remain hallmarks for Egyptian celebrations, particularly in Ramadan and ‘Id or holy feasts.

The demand for commodities that are directly connected with acts of worship or holding sacred images, writings or figures noticeably increases before the holy month begins. Many street vendors put aside their day-to-day products and substitute that space for displaying Islamic/traditional dress such as the gallabiyya, women’s head scarves, Koran and Koran interpretations (book and audio formats), prayer rugs, prayer beads or sebha etc. The array of religious commodities in Cairo has increased dramatically in the last two decades to also include such forms as ‘bumper stickers, key-chains, posters, board games, jigsaw puzzles, coloring books, fans, clocks, framed Koran verses, banners, greeting cards, decorative items in ceramic, brass, wood, cloth and paper, cassette tapes and videos, paper models of mosques..’ etc. (Cf. Starrett, 1995). Besides these forms of religious commodities I have also seen some T-shirts and head caps on sale, written on them (in Arabic and English) statements like ‘Muhammed, Naby el-Salam’ (Muhammed, The Prophet of Peace) and ‘Long Live Islam’. The youth who mainly purchased these t-shirts were the ones who travelled or studied abroad, particularly in Western countries. One girl who frequently travels to the UK said that she wore it once there, during a group protest against the Danish ‘slanderous’ comics on the Prophet Muhammed.121

This section showed how Islamic and traditional commodities are contextualized in relation to the social, economic and political circumstances. They can serve as markers

121 Satirical cartoons of Prophet Muhammed published in Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten on 30 September 2005 caused wide resentment among Muslims worldwide.
or symbols for social status, political affiliation and also tastes. Consequently, these commodities are adapted to appeal to the wide array of consumer markets.

4.3 Outdoor decorations

In the line of welcoming Ramadan, stores, confectionery shops, supermarkets and other commercial outlets decorate their venues with colorful ornaments, lanterns etc. Enthusiastic neighbors also join forces to decorate their streets or alleyways and house entrances with colorful lanterns and glittery paper or plastic-made slips and lights. In affluent neighborhoods in Cairo I observed that the majority of people settle for decorating the entrances of their villas or buildings. Usually the residence’s ra’is ettehad el-mollak or head of owners’ union and the caretaker or bawwab of the building collect money from all the apartment owners to purchase lantern(s) and other types of decorations. Most of the time the bawwab and owners’ children are the ones who take part in hanging the ornaments on the building walls.

Upper class women interviewees stated that they did not place the Ramadan ornaments themselves as they viewed it ‘improper for a lady especially of their social class’ for various reasons. Placing the ornaments, they explained, requires a lot of physical energy and bodily movements (bending down, reaching high etc.) which may attract men’s attention and is thus haram, especially with the holy month around the corner.

The display of wealth and prestige, in terms of affording to hire third-parties, serves as an important symbol of social advancement in the Egyptian community. This point will be extensively elaborated on in chapter six on umma that partially deals with social mobility and its impact on social classes’ desires and frustrations.

At Boulaq, a less affluent neighborhood in Cairo, I noticed that many of the alleyways and houses were decorated with Ramadan ornaments. Unlike the ornaments used at affluent neighborhoods, the ones found in Boulaq were handmade and more

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122 In Cairo it is common that apartment owners of a residential building to assign one owner to coordinate all administrative and financial matters related to the building e.g. collection/payment of caretaker’s salary and supervision of building cleanliness.
elaborate. The handmade decorations did not only encourage creativity but also save a lot of money which is an important criterion for the success of the project.

According to some of the people I interviewed in Boulaq, alley-decoration is a joint project that involves everyone in the area. There are those who set a budget for the project, others that collect the money from everyone, those who take part in making the ornaments and finally those who hang the decorations.

A few days before Ramadan started in 2007, I was walking around in Boulaq and witnessed the ‘farha’ or joyful events that went with the final touches of hanging the Ramadan ornaments in one area. Most of the neighbors were either on the street or the balconies smiling and joking together. Children, especially, were in the street running, cheering and firing sawarekh. While most neighbors clapped, cheered and greeted one another ‘koll sana w-entu tayyebin’ or merry wishes, some women gave out some zagharit. Fifty-one years old Nawarah, known for having the loudest and longest zagharit, was given the honor of giving out the first zaghruta when the final ornament was hung.

This section highlights how preparations for the sacred month are not absolutely detached from profane festivities and jollities, regardless of social class. It also revealed how social classes greatly vary in how they prepare for the holy month, in relation to consumption practices.

4.4 Removing obscene images

Another phenomenon that I witnessed in Cairo streets during Sha`ban is the elimination of street advertisements with images perceived as ‘obscene’. Most commercial companies make sure they remove advertisements that have images of women with bare shoulders, legs or seductive appearances before Ramadan starts. According to a senior account executive I interviewed who works for one of Egypt’s most prominent

123 The decorations in Boulaq were made from used cloth, plastic, candy wrappings and scraps of paper. Sometimes professional or amateur artists in the neighborhood will also paint sacred symbols like the holy shrine, crescent and calligraphically write verses from the holy book connected to Ramadan and add them to their designs.

124 Zagharit are kinds of melodic sound that women, in the Middle East, talent fully produce with their mouths in expression of delight.
advertising agency, most companies withdraw advertisements with ‘sexually suggestive’ images before Ramadan for two reasons. First of all, they do not want to lose credibility among their dominant Muslim market. Secondly, most companies have special Ramadan campaigns for their products that are usually launched before the holy month begins. These campaigns are usually based on key Ramadan-related themes (breaking of the fast and *sahur* meals) and figures that I will present in later chapters.

When marketers fail to remove ‘obscene’ images of their billboard advertisements on Cairo streets, some people take matters into their own hands. Throughout the year I have seen numerous advertisements confiscated and sprayed with black ink. Usually the ink is directed on covering revealed bodily parts of female models. During Sha`ban and Ramadan this phenomenon reaches a peak where almost all those advertisements with attractive female models are tampered with. Twenty-two years old Lamia told me that even though she never took part in damaging obscene advertisements, she does find it unacceptable to have seductive images displayed in the public sphere especially at this time of the year. According to her, allowing obscene images to be displayed during the holy month should be placed in the same ‘blasphemous category’ as the Danish cartoon case of mis-representing Prophet Muhammed. The first case, in her opinion, is even worst since the ‘inappropriate’ images were produced by Muslims and placed in a Muslim country.

4.5 Public sermons

During Sha`ban, mosques become main venues for *imams* to deliver sermons or *khutba*, usually right before prayer times focused on delivering information and advices on how best to practice Ramadan. Since in Sha`ban most women are busy preparing their households and themselves for the advent of the holy month, very few find the time to pray at the mosque or, let alone, listen to sermons held there. On Friday afternoon prayers, where many mosques are licensed to have their *khutba* or sermons on loud speakers, many women residing at near-by houses are able to follow the lecture in the comfort of their homes.
During the month of Sha‘ban public transportation and social clubs become main targets for preachers to spread their messages, particularly to females. Similar to Gaffney’s (1991) observation, I noticed that in modern Cairo were preaching commonly takes place outside of the mosque, this conveys an air of respect despite the profane nature of its location. One time I was taking the underground with my sister when I witnessed a very interesting scene. We were inside one of the women’s compartments busily discussing my research interviews’ schedule when a woman, who appeared in her mid-twenties, stepped in and started delivering a lecture loudly. She started out with *Bism Allah al-Rahman al-Rahim* or ‘In the name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful’ and addressed the female audience as *okhwaty* (to imply ‘my sisters’ in Islam). For about 15 minutes she provided some ‘Dos’ and ‘Don’ts’ on how women are supposed to dress and behave in Ramadan, and the virtues or *thawab* that apply in obeying Allah’s commandments during the holy month. The preaching of the woman immediately created an aura of reverence within the compartment. When the preacher started the lecture many women put aside their readings and took off their headphones to listen attentively. When the preacher mentioned the name of Prophet Muhammed most people repeated ‘*Salla Allahu ‘alayhi wa-sallam*’ (asking for Allah’s prayers and peace on the Prophet) and at one time when she said something about the grace and mercy of God one woman shouted ‘*Allahu Akbar*’ (God is great). Unfortunately I didn’t get a chance to speak to this ‘preacher’ as by the time she was done the train had reached its next destination and she quickly hopped off.

While the reactions of the women in the metro may refer to religiosity, that some should have acted out of a felt need to demonstrate socially acceptable behavior should not be ruled out as shows the comments of 19-year old Lara who also witnessed the same scene. Lara communicated disapproval towards these kinds of public sermons. She stated that it is not ‘right for any person to impose their lecture in a public transportation. I can’t exactly fly out of the train to avoid her speech…and it will be a sign of disrespect to put on my mp3 player headphone since the woman (preacher) is talking religion’. Lara
added that the credentials of the preacher is unknown and thus there is a probability that her lecture is based on ‘false information or exaggerations’.  

Another time I was invited to a religious lecture at an elite sporting club in Heliopolis about two weeks before Ramadan started in 2007. The lecture was named ‘Umsiyat Ramadan’ or ‘Ramadan Evenings’. The lecture was held at the club’s garden and was attended by, mostly, young women adults. The preacher spoke in colloquial Arabic and, besides communicating the theological foundation of Ramadan practices, addressed some issues women face in modern time e.g. hardships with trying to coordinate job, house and children demands while fasting. After the lecture, some of the attendees went on browsing and purchasing some of the preacher’s published Islamic books, tape cassettes and CDs available at a close-by booth. Commercial interests, in terms of the sales of Islamic commodities, are present at almost all sermons I have attended at mosques, cultural centers and sporting clubs.

5. Conclusion

This chapter presented how the boundaries defining the sacred from the profane start to shift in the month preceding Ramadan. It was shown how upper-middle class youth leisure behavior, private and public spaces change to accommodate to the sacred demands of the holy month. Youth went through various bodily processes to prepare themselves for the sacred month, while putting aside profane interests. These include abstaining from alcohol, substituting revealing outfits with modest ones, ending or setting-up new restrictions with the opposite sex. Moreover, they prefer to focus on researching and signing up for religious classes and charity projects scheduled for Ramadan. The same concept applies to private and public spaces where obscene scenes are removed, thorough house cleansing is carried out and public sermons are intensified. At the same time, profane places like public transportation and sporting clubs become arenas for spreading religious messages through sermons, posts, stickers and other mediums.

125 The Bureau of Mosques (maktab al-masajjid) within the ministry of religious endowments in Egypt is responsible for providing formal approvals to those who want to practice preaching. See, Gaffney (1991) for further information.
Simultaneously, it was noted that preparations for the holy month are not based on absolute elimination of the profane. Some of the preparations that youth undergo for the holy month are associated with worldly concerns. Many of the young females are keen in looking slim, similar to their favorite celebrities, and hence dedicate some time for researching/planning special Ramadan diets and exercise schedules. Some respondents access the internet and some print media to learn about forthcoming Ramadan soap-operas and shows. Also in a few cases, some individuals perceive Sha’ban as their last chance to enjoy mundane leisure activities before committing to the spiritual demands of Ramadan. A few even intensify going to parties, swimming, playing gymnastics and other kinds of sports that entails dressing up in tight or revealing outfits. In addition, the consumerist culture is eminent during Sha’ban as reflected in people’s high shopping trends (food, lanterns, Islamic commodities), commercial advertisements and sales promotions.

This chapter also touched on key preparation differences between those affiliated with the upper and lower classes. These mainly include unequal access to various kinds of Ramadan-related commodities, and variations in how each social class takes part in decorating their neighborhoods. Economic constraints and class specific tastes shape how each social class experiences the preparatory month of Sha`ban. Chapter six on umma or unity within the Muslim community will extensively probe into these points. A crucial factor that influenced informants’ preparation practices in Sha`ban was time. In recent years, the month of Sha`ban falls right after summertime and before schools/universities begin. As mentioned previously summertime is the prime time for the youth to intensively participate in mundane recreation activities. It is also the time when romance blossoms according to female interviewees. Sha`ban therefore becomes a very important preliminary time for the female respondents to ‘purify’ themselves from profane, and some forbidden acts, and to enter the sacred realm of Ramadan. Moreover, the fact that Ramadan starts in about the same times as schools, means that low-income households' financial burden will be increased and, consequently, their Ramadan experience will vary considerably from those of the higher classes.

By having briefly explored upper-middle class female youth leisure throughout the year several points are highlighted. Generally, their year-long leisure time is primarily
dedicated to worldly recreation activities that are consumer-oriented. Some of the young Egyptian Muslim women’s preferred leisure activities and spaces are reinvented in a manner that matches their religious and culture background, and modern tastes as well. For example, some of the music that has become fashionable among this social group is remodeled to combine Western and Middle-Eastern melodies together. Besides the availability of trendy cafes and beaches, one also witnesses women-only types for these same leisure venues. In other words, youth leisure is a hybrid one that combines various global features and accommodates variations in cultural and religious preferences.

The reinvention of culture in the modern context is not only restricted to youth's year-long leisure, but also applies to the Ramadan culture as well. Islamic-traditional commodities and practices, connected to the holy month, have become modified to match the modern context. The result is that the Ramadan culture has become hybrid in nature as will be presented in the next chapter.