Ramadan culture in modern Cairo
Saad Aly, Nervana Mohamed Emam

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CHAPTER SIX
THE MODERN UMMA: SOCIAL COHESION AND ENTITLEMENT TO LEISURE RESOURCES

During fieldwork I heard time after time, expressions like ‘Ramadan beyheb el-lamma’ or ‘Ramadan loves get together’, ‘Sohbet Ramadan mafish zayyaha’ or ‘Nothing compares to Ramadan companionship’, ‘Ramadan ya’ny nas metgama`in’ or ‘Ramadan means people getting together’. Commercial companies also adopt special taglines or mottos in their yearly Ramadan campaigns that emphasize social unity. For instance, Coca-cola for uses ‘Lammet Ramadan tehla ma`a Coca-cola’ or ‘Ramadan gatherings become better or more enjoyable with Coca-cola’. Certainly, almost all the Ramadan spiritual and recreation activities are collective in nature as people come together to break the fast, eat *sahur*, pray *tarawih*, attend religious classes, *kheyam Ramadan* and other activities. Apparently, the patterns of public piety, recreation and consumption at Ramadan’s leisure venues establish what Brubaker (2004) would call an act ‘groupness’ that creates feelings of commonality and connectedness for those who participate together. During Ramadan, people strive to revitalize an ideal social system where social cohesion between different groups prevails. This romanticized social structure of unity and equality are key constituents for the religious notion of *umma* or Islamic community. Throughout this chapter, I use the concept of *umma* as an overall frame of reference to examine how this notion is reinterpreted, reaffirmed and challenged in contemporary Ramadan leisure practices.

The temporary social formation of equality and solidarity, accentuated by the religious-social spirit of Ramadan, can be referred to from a theoretical perspective as *communitas*. Communitas is a key concept in liminality, which Turner (1969) defines as a strong bond attaching people together, regardless of formal social structure. Communal leisure activities and interactions tend to contribute to the maintenance of society by providing preparation for and recuperation from work. This view includes a social space for bonding in the family and community, and time for religious activities and celebration of ideological consensus (Kelly and Godbey, 1992).

192 Similar to Buitelaar (1993), I describe the social relations between people during Ramadan in terms of Turner’s *communitas*. Buitelaar’s study was however based on Morocco.

193 The notion of social cohesion embedded within *communitas* is closely related to Emile Durkheim’s structure-functional theory that addresses the issue of social solidarity and persistence. Communal leisure activities and interactions tend to contribute to the maintenance of society by providing preparation for and recuperation from work. This view includes a social space for bonding in the family and community, and time for religious activities and celebration of ideological consensus (Kelly and Godbey, 1992).
status, sex, dress, and role temporary disappear and are replaced by activities which the participants are treated equally. Consequently, in communitas group unity is experienced, and a kind of generic bond outside the constraints of social structure is encountered. Turner (1969) argues that the ultimate purpose of communitas is to purify, redefine and revitalize a social structure to reach an idealized social formation.

Despite the ideal of equality and social cohesion, modern economic constraints restrict certain social classes’ access to some public leisure commodities, activities and spaces. Some older respondents and members of the lower-classes express discontent towards, what they view as lack of moral responsibility among wealthy Egyptians. They believe that youth have become more ‘selfish’, and are only interested in capturing new capital opportunities and advancing in social status; while investing less time in familial and charity responsibilities. In other words, the capitalistic nature of modern Egypt is interpreted as mediating human relationships through money and, as a consequence, establishing social alienation. These capitalist factors, among others, may undermine the social cohesion of the umma in Muslim societies.

In this chapter I explore how the egalitarian notion of umma is conceptualized within the modern Egyptian context and how its meanings shift with the advent of the sacred month. In the first part I introduce the meaning of umma from a theological perspective. I then explore its contemporary meanings and significance mainly in relation to gender, social class and, finally, the modern nation-state. I will investigate gender issues that determine access to leisure resources. I will specifically focus on women’s access to the public sphere with the advent of Ramadan in comparison to other times of the year. I will then address the issue of social class differences in conjunction to Ramadan-related religious activities, commercial products and recreation facilities. It becomes apparent that some Ramadan leisure activities inverse social class distinctions, while others re-affirm those distinctions. Finally, I will explore how the presentday

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194 Many sociologists of the late 19th and early 20th century were concerned about alienating effects of modernization with special emphasis on capitalism. Karl Marx argued that the atomism of modern society has caused alienation of individuals, or their estrangement from traditional community mainly as a result of capitalism. They have shallower relations with other people and, this in turn, leads to difficulties in understanding one another. Ferdinand Tönnies Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft (Community and Society) also discussed the loss of primary relationships such as familial bonds in favor of goal oriented capitalistic relationships.
Egyptian government tries to propagate a nationalistic image of the umma based on citizenship rather than religion. My main argument here is that meanings associated with the Muslim umma are being redefined within the changing modern context of capitalism, social mobility, city-structure and nation-state ambitions. Economic, political, social and spatial circumstances have given new meanings to social solidarity and conditions to leisure access, which come to the fore during the holy month.

1. The Meaning of Umma in Islamic Doctrine

_Uumma_, is an Arabic word meaning community. Generally, however, it is understood to refer to Islamic community or ‘Community of the Believers’ (_ummat al-mu’minin_), whereby the whole Muslim world is based on an ideal unification of all Muslims. Traditional formal Sunni orthodoxy holds that this egalitarian ideal of social structure is connected with the Islamic community founded by the Prophet Muhammad. Dr. Hammudah Abdalati (1975), graduate from Al-Azhar university in Egypt and renowned religious scholar, states that all humans are members of the universal family formed by the First Father and the First Mother, and are thus entitled to attain the common rewards as they are enjoined to share the same responsibilities. In other words, according to Abdalati the key aspect of _umma_ is equality among mankind, leaving no room for racism, social injustice or second-class citizenship. In a lecture I attended for preacher Fadel Soliman, (8-10 July, 2008) head of Bridges Foundation and popular among the youth community in Egypt, he stated that a core aspect of Islam is equality and prohibition of discrimination in accordance to the Koran. In line with this argument, other scholars argued that nowhere in the Koran or _ahadith_ can one find privilege granted to one social class, wealth or place of birth (Abdalati, 1975). They point out that, on the contrary, Islamic scriptures constantly provide reference to unity of humanity by nature and origin.  

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195 Soliman noted that the original sin in Islam whereby Satan (like all angels was created from light) arrogantly refused to bow to Adam (created from clay), saying ‘why should I bow to man, I am made of pure fire’ (Koran, Surat 7:16).

196 For example see in the Koran, 4:1; 7:189; 49:10-13
The ‘ulama also holds that unity of mankind is not only dependent on its origin, but also its ultimate goals. It is believed that the ultimate goal of humanity in Islam is for humans to worship and serve Allah and His causes (Abdalati, 1975). Some of the causes that are commanded by God are virtues of truth, justice, love and mercy of brotherhood and morality. The unity of origin and the ultimate goal are believed to serve as the main foundations of the social life in Islamic umma, as they specify the ‘ideal’ relationships between individuals within a given society.

Moreover, social life in Islam is interpreted by religious scholars to outline an umma that serves a complementary relationship between the individual and society. There should be social cohesion and responsibility for one another; all individuals, equally and collectively, are expected to contribute to their society and its common welfare (Abdalati, 1975). This means not only providing help to unprivileged people, but also playing an active role in the formation of sound social morals and combating evil. In return the individual is entitled to security and care, should he become disabled.

This idealized unified Muslim community founded by the Prophet is nowadays perceived to have become weakened as society progressed. Modernization and economic challenges are perceived to have disrupted social cohesion and a sense of responsibility towards others. The main issue of criticism in relation to today’s Muslim community, is that various social categories (mainly gender and social classes) do not stand equal and, further, that solidarity among Muslims has become undermined. The sacred-communal nature of the holy month, however, sets new socio-cultural rules that redefine social relations and consequently may empower some groups.

2. Women’s Access to Leisure Resources

The Koran emphasizes the equality of men and women in regard to their respective duties, rights, virtues and merits. Also, as I have noted in the previous chapter, the capacity for taqwa is distributed equally among both genders. According to the Koran, women and men stand equal in the Islamic umma. However, that sense of gender

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197 For example, see in the Koran, 51:56-58
198 See for example Surat al-Ahzab (33:35)
equivalence found in Islamic scriptures, does not strictly apply in conceptions of femininity and gender relations in Muslim societies.

Prevailing socio-cultural expectations and interpretations of some religious scriptures greatly constrain females’ access to leisure resources in comparison to males. Hence, one can argue that in relation to leisure entitlement, women and men do not stand equal. In Ramadan, though, new socio-cultural rules apply that increase females’ access to leisure resources, particularly public space. For a limited time period during the holy month, women enjoy higher access and freedom within the public leisure sphere.

In this section I will introduce the dominant social discourses that constrain Egyptian Muslim women’s access to leisure resources throughout the year. I will then describe how the liminal nature of the holy month introduces new religious and socio-cultural rules that allow women’s increased participation in the public sphere. My main argument in this section is that women’s increased access to public leisure venues during the holy month does not only serve recreational or spiritual purposes but also allows them to obtain new knowledge, experiences and establish new forms of solidarities. This in turn may serve as potential opportunities to challenge dominant gender discourses and current power inequalities that limit their access to leisure resources throughout the year.

2.1 Dominant socio-cultural discourses

Women are generally entitled to less leisure resources in comparison to men. At almost all life stages, women’s leisure participation is generally constrained by gender relations. Female’s leisure opportunities, whether real or perceived, are conditioned by local patriarchal relations that are reproduced in the home, workplace and community (Mowl and Towner, 1994). Those dominant patriarchal rules are motivated by the desire to control females’ body, sexuality, offspring and, more importantly, minds.

Key socio-cultural expectations concerning femininity and motherhood affect Arab Muslim women’s access to leisure resources. In Arab societies, women are

\[^{199}\text{Cf. Talbot 1979; Deem 1986; Wearing and Wearing 1988; Green et al. 1990; Henderson 1991.}\]

\[^{200}\text{Patriarchy is defined as the power that men have over women based on legal, political and cultural norms (Inhorn, 1996). Joseph (1996:14) elaborates on this definition to state that in the Arab context, patriarchy justifies the rights of men over females with some religious interpretations.}\]
conditioned to believe that they are sexually vulnerable thus in need of protection by male family members. This has key implications on women’s access to leisure space. The femininity discourse constrains women’s access to the public sphere and facilitates man’s right in controlling their mobility (World Bank, 2004). Particularly, perceptions on motherhood play a major role in women lack of access to leisure, especially free time. Islamic scriptures highly elevate the status and respect of mothers, viewing motherhood as the perfection of the Muslim woman’s religion and the path by which she attains respect in this life and the ultimate reward in the afterlife (Inhorn, 1996). Common Islamic discourse widely promotes conservative views of women as wives and mothers only (Ahmed, 1992). The focus is on women’s roles as breeders and family keepers, who are expected to invest almost all of their free time towards their family. Consequently, this leaves little time for women’s personal leisure away from childcare and other family obligations.

What is particularly important to realize is that many women have internalized these dominant discourses and have come to view them as the norm. Bourdieu (1977) calls such implicit norms the ‘doxic’ or the taken-for-granted domain that is central to any domination system. Patriarchal systems manage to survive only when this order is accepted by all social agents (dominated and dominant groups), shaping their behavior and perceptions of their world. Thus rather than perceiving the male-dominated system as being imposed on them, women accept it as the normal course of things. Samdahl (1998: 2) argues that gendered expectations are most effective when they are deeply embedded, hence becoming invisible. Accordingly, the author adds, many women play out gender roles without ever understanding how cultural expectations have shaped and limited their choices and behavior. In discussing Egyptian women in particular, Ghannam (2000) notes that when notions of solidarity, affection and modesty are entwined with power inequalities between family members then the system of domination is the most effective.

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201 For an interesting study on how motherhood as a gender discourse constrains women’s leisure see, Kay (2003).

202 Personal leisure is the core of leisure, during which women do not have temporarily responsibilities from the family and labour domain. Neither family members nor employers are allowed to make an appeal on them. Personal leisure is composed of both formal (sports and other scheduled leisure activities) and informal leisure such as women gatherings, going out for walks etc. (Karsten, 1998).
There are several implications of these internalized dominant discourses in connection to women’s access to leisure. In regards to the issue of motherhood or the ethic of care, various international studies reveal that even when mothers find the time to engage in personal leisure activities they experience a low sense of fulfillment. The subjective feelings that mothers must always be on duty to properly care for others is identified as one of the most common and powerful constraints to women’s leisure. Furthermore, women’s access to the public leisure sphere is not only limited but also associated with feelings of apprehension. Samdahl, Hutchinson and Jacobson (1999:2) explain that the fear of violence, the steps and precautions women take to avoid confrontation, clearly show that women know they are entering men’s territory when they venture outdoors.

Reference to the Egyptian context, women’s limited access to the public sphere is not only motivated by notions of shame, honor, avoidance of fitna and the desire to control women’s sexuality. More importantly it aims to limit their access to knowledge and experiences, which potentially challenge current gender/power inequalities as Ghannam reveals in her study (2002).

Young female informants stated that they generally have less access to free time than their male family members. They referred to inequalities in the distribution of chores within the home domain as the main reason. Many of the girls said that their parents usually assigned them relatively more household tasks than their brothers. They are the ones who are expected to help out with the house cleaning and cooking. Employed mothers were especially the ones constrained with access to free time, as they had to juggle work demands and child-care together. However, the household workload greatly depended on the level of help provided by third parties, primarily domestic workers. What seemed to bother the female respondents the most though was the early curfews imposed on them by their parents or husbands. Those girls who have brothers complained that they were expected to be home much earlier than their brothers.

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203 I raise the same argument in a study conducted on Egyptian Muslim mothers and their leisure experience in Saad (2005).


205Ghannam (2002) has researched the issue of engendered public space in Egypt and how it reflects and affects the ways in which gender is constructed and understood. She highlights the fact that men tour the city and enjoy less restricted access to various public spaces. In contrast, Egyptian women’s movement is structured by several dress-codes and is restricted to certain times of the day.
For upper-middle class women their negative experience within the public sphere seemed to be the main leisure constraint. Almost all female informants stated that they felt sexually vulnerable when outside their homes. Sexual harassment is reported by the Egyptian media and female informants as one of the most common threats limiting women’s access within the public sphere. Female informants mentioned numerous incidents where they were sexually harassed verbally and, in a few cases, physically as well.

To understand why sexual harassment has become a major phenomenon in Egyptian streets it is useful to make reference to Kandiyoti’s (1991) analysis of the issue. She argues that sexual harassment in Muslim Arab societies is a reflection of what she calls the ‘patriarchal bargain’ that is in crisis in contemporary times. The patriarchal system is contingent upon the ability of the patriarch to provide for those who defer to his authority. As economic structures shift and women increasingly take jobs outside the home (which used to be a strictly male domain), men no longer hold the power they once did. The patriarchal bargain is thus in a predicament, and this threatens both men and women. Men display ‘frustration and humiliation at being unable to fulfill their traditional role and the threat posed by women's greater spatial mobility and access to paid employment’, (Kandiyoti, 1991: 39). According to Kandiyoti (1991), younger men feel impotent and powerless, and by harassing women on the streets they both prove to themselves that they do have the power to subordinate, and they also attempt to revert to the old model, where public space was almost exclusively male.

To conclude, in the Muslim Egyptian context, the rights of males over females in relation to leisure access are prioritized. Those rights are justified with socio-cultural values which are sometimes supported by religious interpretations. These patriarchal dominant discourses restrict women’s rights to personal leisure time and access to public space. Specifically in relation to upper-middle class female youth, sexual harassment in the streets posed to be the highest reported leisure constraint. Modern economic development, as described by Kandiyoti (1991), explains why Arab women experience sexual harassment within the public sphere.
2.2 Women’s access to public leisure space in Ramadan

During Ramadan new socio-cultural values are introduced that generally affect women’s access to leisure. While most women continue to experience scarcity of free time during the holy month, access to public leisure space significantly increases. In this section, I explore how women’s increased access to public space offers them the prospects to challenge dominant socio-cultural discourses, I discussed earlier, and empower themselves.

Generally all women, particularly working mothers, complain that during Ramadan, domestic chores amplify mainly due to increased guests’ invitations for iftar, food shopping and cooking and thorough house cleaning. For the upper-middle classes that have the financial capability to hire third parties to handle household chores and purchase advanced home devices (e.g. vacuum cleaner), time is not a major constraint.

Alternatively, for all social classes the holy month allows women a much larger access to public leisure spaces. Due to the sacred nature of the holy month all women,
regardless of social position, stated that the rate of sexual harassment and crime is minimal.\footnote{Yet once the holy month is over, sexual harassment and crime dramatically increases. One extreme example to portray point, occurred on the first day of the feast on 24 October (after Ramadan ended) in 2006 when a large number of men publicly harassed women in downtown Cairo. The thing that triggered that outbreak was seductive costume and dancing of Dina (belly-dancer/actor) during the opening night of her film. According to some witnesses, the male audiences went ‘wild’ and ran around like mad in downtown Cairo sexually assaulting females. As a result some government officials suggested launching campaigns against sexual harassment, especially during the last 10 days in Ramadan were some believe that males’ sexual frustration hits the peak (Araby, 2007).} Women feel more secure and less apprehensive to venture more extensively in the public sphere in Ramadan. Upper-middle class women, for instance, said that they felt more confident going to poor areas that are known for extreme poverty and violence in order to distribute Ramadan packages (See image 12). Young women’s parents, also, felt more comfortable allowing their daughters to stay out late and extending curfew hours only during the fasting month.

For other months of the year, when young women’s outings are motivated by socialization or recreation, families place various restrictions that control their movement. Restrictions include imposing early curfews, sending a male chaperon or cutting down pocket money. When women’s leisure is motivated by religious activities, highly desired and encouraged in Ramadan, less restrictions on their mobility applies. Piety to a large degree is attained and expressed through participation in public religious activities outside the home domain. In Ramadan, women prefer and are encouraged by their families to participate in \textit{tarawih} communal prayers at the mosque, religious classes and charity activities which takes place outside the home domain.

What becomes apparent is that women’s increased access to public space, whether for religious or recreational purposes, expands their knowledge and experiences in many arenas. Through their engagement in public leisure activities, women get to exchange information on various subjects that range from employment to travel experiences. It may thus be argued that public leisure spaces, highly accessible in Ramadan, become potential venues for gender negotiations. In public leisure spaces women are temporarily free to express themselves and move beyond dominant gender expectations of femininity and motherhood. As one young female participant noted, mingling with other women from different backgrounds, exposes her to ‘different lifestyles for being a women (besides a wife and a mother, ns)’ or social worlds than what she is used to.
Leisure can thus be a means of liberation from restrictive gender roles and social scripts and thus a ‘means of empowerment’ (Wearing, 1998: 46). Certainly through leisure my informants experienced alternative social positions to those developed through restrictive patriarchal rules. Below are three different girls’ reflections on their experiences on public leisure activities they are involved in during the holy month:

I help organize a *ma'idat al-Rahman* in Mohandiseen every Ramadan. Not only do I gain *ajr* but I also make friends, develop my skills in communication, organization, fund-raising etc. (skill development, ns)

In Ramadan it is easier to gain permission from my father to go out more often….the streets are safer and no one dares to harass a girl. Also my dad greatly encourages me to go out to pray *tarawih* and attend religious classes at the mosque, sporting clubs and cultural centers.

Ramadan gets me out of the home bubble! We (women in her neighborhood, ns) get to see more of each other at the mosque, religious classes or through visitations (for *iftar* and *sahur* gatherings, ns)! Our gatherings include prayers, reading of the Koran, chatting, exchanging advices on jobs, education opportunities, legal issues, romantic relationships, children, travel and loads of fun.

Ramadan’s public leisure activities thus allow women to be part of a collectivity larger than the family, and to learn more about the conditions of others. Similar to other ‘subaltern counter-publics’, public leisure spaces for women may become ‘parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs’ (Fraser 1992:123). In other words, public leisure spaces serve as potential venues for women’s agency. It allows them to experience new knowledge which may potentially challenge gender/power inequalities.

To conclude, Ramadan creates an ambiance that allows women higher access to public leisure spaces. Due to the sacred nature of the holy month, women and their families greatly encourage their participation in religious activities that usually take place outside the home domain. Also, since everyone is supposed to be at their best moral behavior during the holy month, crime rates and sexual harassment decrease noticeably. As a result, a relatively safer public haven for females is created. Women’s increased access to public space during the holy month may serve as a means of empowerment to
expand their knowledge and, accordingly, counter restrictive patriarchal discourses limiting their access to leisure resources throughout the year.

3. Ramadan Leisure and Social Cohesion

Ramadan leisure is predominantly communal based which I argue enhances social cohesion between various social groups in society. The iftar, sahur and other Ramadan family occasions allow young women to bond with family members. This privilege of frequent family get-togethers is not granted during other months of the year due to the rushed lifestyles family members lead. Moreover, religious activities such as tarawih prayers at the mosque and charity work are not only characterized by socialization but by also suspension of social class distinctions. In this section I will explore how Ramadan leisure activities facilitate young upper-middle class women interaction with their families, local community and disadvantaged social groups.

3.1 Implications of youth’s ‘takeaway’ and individualized lifestyles

Nadine is a 22-years old single female who recently graduated from a private university in Cairo. She told me that throughout the year she always feels rushed and stressed juggling numerous tasks from job hunting, meeting friends, playing sports etc. To be able to accomplish all assigned or desired tasks, she does more than one thing at the same time such as exercising on the treadmill while speaking to her friends over the phone and following the news aired at the gym’s plasma televisions. The rushed lifestyle she leads gives her little time to spend with her family, let alone share a meal together. Even when she and her family members get together to share a meal, the increasing tempo of life loses some of its pleasures. According to Nadine’s father, girls like his daughter nowadays lead ‘takeaway lives’, meaning that they are always in a hurry. The father explains this term to mean that like takeaway or ‘on the go junk food’, it is prepared in minutes but is tasteless, unhealthy and has serious health repercussions on the long run. Similar to a person who is always ‘on the go’ or leading a rushed lifestyle, Nadine is
moving fast but not enjoying the ride or process. Eventually her body will get exhausted and breakdown.

The notion of people feeling rushed all the time takes us to a popular book introduced in 1970 known as *The Harried Leisure Class* by Staffan Linder.207 In his book, the author argued that consumption has to be measured in temporal as well as economic terms. He argues that as specialized work in modern life led to a higher degree in productivity, the increased amount of products and services had to be consumed at a higher rate. This led to a person consuming in a speedy manner, consuming more expensive versions of a product or service or by consuming more than one thing at the same time.208 Linder (1970) refers to this as the harried leisure class or an acceleration of the pace of life due to the acceleration of consumption.209 Furthermore, I propose that in leading a hurried lifestyle one’s participation in group activities, such as team sports and family recreation, becomes more complicated. This is because one will have to coordinate her time according to other members’ schedules, thus causing more time pressure.

The fact that people nowadays feel rushed and confronted with time scarcity has serious consequences towards the traditional vision of the Arab family unity. Hopkins and Ibrahim (2006) remind us that the contemporary urban Arab family is reluctantly but steadily going through change in terms of formation, structure and values. One example the authors provide is that the family has become more egalitarian as more women are pursuing education and employment outside the home domain. One other important

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207 Many contemporary social researchers make reference to Linder’s Harried Leisure class that predicted the frantic pace of modern life and leisure. See for example, Aguiar and Hurst (2007).
208 Consumption of one more than one thing at the same time is commonly referred by young informants as multi-task. This acquired ability is viewed as critical to compete efficiently in today’s competitive economy. Multi-tasking is similar to the concept of ‘time deepening’: if a person develops the ability to do several things simultaneously, he can crowd a greater number of activities into the same 24 hours. For more on this concept, refer to Godbey (1980).
209 Linder (1970) stresses the fact that it is not a matter of time deficiency but more perceived time scarcity. In terms of outputs, work time and leisure co-exist in a theoretical equilibrium. Increases in the productivity of work ruined this equilibrium. This was done by combining leisure activity with a higher amount of goods, thus commodifying leisure and bringing its outputs into parity with the increased outputs of work. In a consumptive culture in modern life, the demand for time exceeds the supply, thus giving a sense of lack of time. The result, the author concludes, is that all types of human activities and ventures are sped up or, if they cannot be, begin to disappear. For example, artwork is going down and cooking is sped up.
family structure that is gradually changing within the modern era is individualization within the family itself.

Traditionally the Arab family is seen as the primary building block of society in the sense that communal or corporate interest takes precedence over individual interests and has a strong effect on a person’s outlook and choices (Zuhur, 1992). The nuclear family or *usra* provides a sense of place, pleasant setting and a social network for financial and personal support in the Arab culture (Inhorn, 1996). While almost all of my respondents would agree how important their *usra* is for their feelings of security and content, in reality they lead individualized hurried lifestyles. Individualization or ‘cocooning’, as defined by Hofstee (1980), expresses itself in a more individual leisure pattern where family members no longer undertake the same activities at the same time nor place, but rather focus on themselves (te Kloeze, 1998: 33). Surely, many of the young research informants barely spend time with their families throughout the year. Instead, they prefer to participate in personal leisure activities isolated from family members.

Young upper-middle class women have substantially different interests, experiences and desires than their parents. Almost all of them studied or are studying at foreign universities that were not available to their Arabic-educated parents. They can access new technological mediums, like computers and internet, that some of their parents are incapable of using. They are also more immersed into a consumerist Western culture whose images and narratives are widely circulated at various public spaces. Most of the young parents originated from traditional villages or areas outside of Cairo and grew up in a different cultural setting than their children.

With the sudden change in social mobility in the last forty years many people acquired new wealth and migrated to the capital city as Amin (2000) argues. These people with newly acquired wealth offered their children various opportunities, like education, not available to themselves at the time. As a result, many of the young urban Egyptian generations which my research is focused on, express difficulty in communicating with their parents, particularly those who used to reside in rural areas.

The same explanation of social mobility/migration explains the ever stronger gap in the relationship between young informants with extended family members who reside
in rural Egypt. Young informants stated that throughout the year they did not see much of their extended family members due to time constraints and long commutes. By probing further, it became apparent that some of the young women did not wish to make the effort to get to know their families as they could not relate to their lifestyles. Amin (2000) once again observes that the young generations of migrant parents prefer to dissociate themselves from their parents’ old environment. He explains that these young generations feel ‘arrogant’ and ‘better-off’. However, my young informants stated it was merely difference in backgrounds that constrained communication between themselves and their families residing in rural Egypt.

Parents I interviewed expressed deep disappointment towards their children’s infrequent visit to their relatives in the countryside. They hoped that their children will learn more about their background, respect and adopt certain culture traditions highly celebrated in the village like honor and chastity. They explained that extended family members also offer one another all sorts of support, mainly financial and psychological, when someone encounters a problem.²¹⁰ Holy occasions such as Ramadan and Eid (concluding feast) offer the opportunity to re-affirm family bonds and express gratitude towards one another.

Another key implication of youth’s rushed/individualized lifestyles is their reluctance to participate actively in charity work throughout the year. In a capitalist and rapidly changing society, with the opening of new opportunities for swift social advancements, moral principles become seen as nothing more than an excessive sentimentality (Amin, 2000). For young Egyptians who are heavily immersed in a global capitalist system, philanthropic principles may also be viewed as incompatible with the new commercial and competitive context. Youngsters, who lead rushed lifestyles, would rather prioritize their free leisure time to financially-rewarding endeavors than dedicating time to charity work.

²¹⁰ One father, for example, recited a story of how one of his teenage daughters went through some legal complications when she accidently hit someone with her car. He proudly explained to me in detail how his entire family came from all over Egypt to stand by his side. They collected money and hired for his daughter one of the most renowned lawyers in the country.
In contrast, during the holy month the tempo of life slows down allowing young people to bond with their families, local communities and disadvantaged social groups as I will present next.

3.2 Bonding with the family and local community

In this section I will draw attention to the main Ramadan leisure activities that draw young women closer with their families, neighbors and overall local community. I will particularly highlight how social cohesion is enhanced at some Ramadan activities.

Ramadan is the time when young girls mingle more with their families, mainly during *iftar* and *sahur* meals. Respondents noted that one of their favorite moments during the holy month is sharing meals with their families. Indeed, Ramadan meal times are not restricted to sharing food and drinks. It includes family bonding where members have time to discuss problems, share stories and joke together. Further, it facilitates understanding and communication between family members. This becomes particularly essential nowadays where there is a growing cultural or intellectual discrepancy between the young generations and their parents.

When the holy month begins parents are keen in exchanging *iftar* and *sahur* invitations with extended family and insist that their children take part. One young upper class female told me that before Ramadan starts and before her mother begins sending invitations to extended family members, her mother gathers her family unit to outline the entire family tree. The informant explained that since they hardly see their extended family she, her sister and brothers always get their family names confused. This may become a major source of embarrassment for the parents.

Another key opportunity that Ramadan offers is networking with people residing in one’s local district. As one informant jokingly said, ‘I only see my neighbors in Ramadan or when a fire breaks out and we are all fleeing the building’. Besides inviting one’s neighbor for *iftar* meals, many neighbors take up the tradition of sending and reciprocating plates of Ramadan delicacies throughout the month. Decorations of the residential building or neighborhood are also major projects that bring neighbors together. Informants assured me that in taking part in these projects they get to know their neighbors better.
Establishing strong relationships with one’s neighbors is useful as they may offer assistance in various kinds of matters. One girl told me that she was once being stalked by a man in a car on her way homecoming home from university. She said one of her male neighbors standing in the balcony coincidently saw this man bothering her. He immediately came down from the building, fought with the man and reported him to the police. Interestingly, this informant mentioned that it is a ‘two blade sword’, an expression to mean that getting to know your neighbors well has its pros and cons. One disadvantage is that once they know you well they get to become intrusive and gossipmongers, explained the informant.

The notion of privacy and maintaining a ‘good image’ in front of the neighbors was very important for my young informants.211 My informants continuously complained that their parents restricted their leisure time by placing early curfews as they feared their neighbors would spread rumors about them being immoral. As I tackled in the previous chapter and in accordance to Smock and Youssef (1998) research, the misbehavior of the girl may not only jeopardize her reputation, but rather her entire family. Thus a few of the female informants noted that it was better for them not to frequently interact with neighbors, including getting involved in joint Ramadan projects, so as not to trigger negative gossips. This highlights the fact that there are ambivalences surrounding the desire to get closer to one’s neighbors within Muslim communities.

Another sign of unification apparent in Ramadan is people’s increased participation in communal religious classes and prayers. Religious classes that my respondents took part in were either at prestigious private clubs or at home i.e. confined within their upper class social circle. However, at the mosque during tarawih prayers one observes a fascinating suspension of class distinctions. Most people, regardless of their wealth or social class, prefer to pray in congregation at the mosques during the holy month. The mosque is not only a place for prayers but for socialization as well.212

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211 None of the Arabic-English dictionaries tend to give a thorough description of the word privacy. The word being translated as ‘uzla (seclusion and solitude), sirriyya (secretiveness), wihda (loneliness) and khalwa (retreat) does not point to a desired, positive momentary separation of the self from others. However, the absence of an equivalent Arabic word for the English concept of privacy does not mean that the concept is non-existent in the Egyptian context. Informants referred to privacy in Arabic as khososeyya or personal.

212 Cf. Ghannam (2002:126) who also acknowledges how the mosque as a space facilitates networking and ‘promises to establish a unified collectivity out of a heterogeneous neighborhood’.
distinctive scene to see an immense number of diverse individuals, dressed in clothing that range from expensive designer wear to modest *gallabiyya* and who come to the mosque on foot or with latest car models, all standing side by side praying together. Surely, watching all the women standing shoulder to shoulder, conducting the prayer postures all at the same time appeals to the ideal of a unified *umma*.

Fifty-eight year old Mustafa, a street vendor selling prayer rugs in front of mosques, summed it up beautifully by stating:

> At the mosque you see people coming to the mosque for *tarawih* in extravagant cars like Mercedes and BMWs and others in public transportation or even walking. Some people are dressed in the latest fashion clothing while others come in rags. However all these differences do not matter once they are in the mosque. They are all Muslims praying to one God, Allah. This is the Islamic *umma*.

Absence of spatial segregation at the mosque, in relation to social class distinctions, stands in striking contrast to the hierarchal society Egyptians are part of. Unlike private sporting clubs with high membership fees or coffee shops that impose a minimum charge, admittance to the mosque is free. The mosque is unique in terms of opening its doors to everyone, regardless of one’s wealth or social class.

To sum up, certain Ramadan leisure activities help narrow the widening generation and social class gaps existing in Egyptian society. Through the sharing of *iftar* and *sahur* meals, reciprocating plates of Ramadan delicacies, decorations of residential buildings or neighborhood and communal prayers at the mosque, young girls get to bond more with families and neighbors. One key change that occurs particularly at the mosque, is the suspension of social class differences where all participants stand equal, regardless of affluence.

### 3.3 Political activism and solidarities

Ramadan does not only draw young upper-middle class Egyptian women closer towards their families and local communities but also unprivileged social groups. In previous chapters, I have described people’s general sentiment that Muslims should take action to help those fellow Muslims living under the ‘horrors’ of occupation and ‘safeguard’ the
future of Islam by those (prejudiced Western media and political parties) who threaten its existence. These feeling were openly expressed by young informants and some preachers delivering religious speeches in Ramadan. Preachers strongly urged people to pray for the ‘victimized’ Muslims in Ramadan, the time when ‘devils are chained’ and God grants wishes.

A few members of the young generation, however, feel that prayers are not enough to resolve the ‘predicament’ Muslims are facing nowadays, especially those that reside in Western countries. They believe that Muslims should physically unite and launch campaigns to help combat anti-Muslim sentiment, ‘unjustified’ occupation and the ‘abuse’ Muslims face. Some voice their collective opinions in the form of e-mails, blogs, newsletters posted over the internet, public lectures, wearing t-shirts with political statements and, in rare instances, through demonstrations.

A few of the young women I talked to also hold the opinion that the impairment of the umma’s wellbeing is not only generated by foreign political systems but local ones as well. They described the local government as ‘corrupt’ and not granting basic human rights to the wide population. Twenty-one year old Dina a political activist whom I referred to earlier in chapter four explained that Egypt, like most Arab states, suffers from lack of human rights. She referred to the low education and rights of women, the presence of Emergency laws and general police-state actions in the political sphere. She gave the example of when the Egyptian government used violence as an intimidation in the last parliamentary elections. Dina affirmed that the lower classes do not have access to health, education and other basic human needs that members of the higher social classes are granted in abundance.

213 In December 2004 a group of Cairo-based Arab intellectuals distributed their draft to the Arab Human Development Report, produced for the United Nations Development Program. The report held that the Egyptian government, other Arab governments and the U.S. foreign policy were responsible for the lack of human health, education, and social and cultural advancements, poverty and social exclusion in the region. For more on this story refer to Khouri (2004).

214 I refer to Dina frequently in discussing political activism as very few of the other respondents were or admitted they were active in politics. Many informants did in fact express awareness of the hardships lower-middle classes faced, but very few of them stated that they were actively involved in political groups or took part in demonstrations similar to Dina’s case. This supports what Mona al-Ghobashy (2005) suggests, ‘The younger representatives of Egypt’s ruling class may be technologically savvy, US-educated and American-accented, and properly deferential to private sector dominance and the laws of the market but when it comes to institutionalizing binding consultation of citizens or protecting citizens from arbitrary state power, their silence is palpable…’
Ramadan leisure is collective in nature, which in Dina’s opinion, serves as a key opportunity for launching a political campaign such as circulating newsletters or organizing demonstrations:

Ramadan is about unity….Unity is one of the wisdoms and teaching of Islam and Ramadan…..Unity is the foundation for developing and implementing a successful political strategy against all (Muslims and non-Muslims, ns) who deprive our Muslim brothers and sisters from their basic human rights.

The mosque in particular offers an important arena for people to network, voice their opinions and organize political stances or activities. In the words of Dina, the mosque in Ramadan is a good place to recruit new members in the political organization she runs. In fact, some youngsters view the mosque not only a place for prayers and socialization, but also as a source for political activism.

Not surprisingly, the Egyptian government fears the collective nature of mosque gatherings, predominant during the holy month, and has thus increased control over them in the last few years. In fact, Ramadan is one major time of the year where political and event violent upheavals take places in Muslim countries. Islamist groups in Pakistan calling for *sharia* governance, for example, launched attacks against the government during Ramadan in 2008.

It thus becomes apparent that while Ramadan provides leisurely occasions for people to gather, this trend is not always welcomed by everyone. Some people capitalize on the communal nature of Ramadan, at the mosques in particular, to organize oppositional demonstrations and other forms of political campaigns. In response, the Egyptian government has increased control and surveillance over public gatherings at the mosque or elsewhere specifically during the holy month.

3.4 Charity work and inversion of social class distinctions

Another more common approach most of the young upper-middle class females adopt to alleviate unprivileged people’s problems is through charity work.\textsuperscript{215} In chapter four all

\textsuperscript{215} Various authors who examined post modernity argued that hand in hand with individualisation (the process indicating the individual is more and more responsible for his own choices) comes ‘solidarisation’
sorts of charity work youth intensively participate in during Ramadan were described in detail. The Ramadan charity projects establish a temporary setting for community cohesion among those from different socio-economic backgrounds. One key observation at charity projects is the inversion of social class distinctions or a ‘leveling process’ in social classes, resonating Turner (1969) theoretical reflection on communitas. Another key feature of Ramadan philanthropic projects is that many are executed at slums and shanty towns that have mushroomed in the second half of the 20th century. Accordingly, many young upper class women volunteers temporarily move out from their elitist residential neighborhoods and exclusive leisure spaces and access meager areas that they typically avoid.

Throughout the year, wealthy Egyptians are served by those from inferior social classes at home and leisure domains. Upper-middle classes have the financial resources to hire third parties to handle domestic chores and, in some instances, child-care. What is relevant here is that at the Ramadan charity projects, affluent sponsors and volunteers are the ones serving lower classes by offering material goods and emotional support. A good example to demonstrate the suspension of social hierarchies at charity projects is the ma'idat al-Rahman.

Social class boundaries are temporary suspended at the banquet of the Merciful, especially evident at the one described in Boulaq district in chapter four. The ma'ida sponsors, of relatively high social status, were carrying out activities like food preparation service that they usually do not perform during other times of the year. As a matter of fact, many of those eating at the ma'ida were the ones mostly serving the sponsors all year long. It goes without saying that the kind of role reversal that goes about at the ma'idat is surrounded by ambivalences and creates awkward feelings on both sides. The deference of the lower-class guests at the banquet, who continuously and graciously thanked the sponsors and volunteers loudly prayed for their good health and fortune, illustrate that they remain consciously aware of their inferior social standard.

or the process indicating people are taking responsibility for others in new ways, entering into new relationships (Weeda, 1992) and taking ‘moral responsibility’ or taking care of others (Bauman, 1993:13).

216 Generally, upper classes have relatively more free time for leisure participation than other social classes, since they can afford to hire third parties. Kelly and Godbey (1992) refers to this trend as the ‘hierarchy of social privilege’.

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According to upper-middle class young informants, their participation in Ramadan charity projects is ‘incomparable’ to their leisure experiences all year long. Charity projects do not only fulfill them spiritually but also exposes them to a different social environment from what they are accustomed to. The leisure of that social class segment throughout the year is confined within a specific elitist social circle, mainly among those that can afford the high expense goods and services. In chapter three I presented how upper class youth’s year-long leisure spaces are inaccessible to the majority of the population, and arguably, alienate them from other social segments. In her study on Cairo, De Koning (2006) notes that global trend in cities and the high production and consumption has isolated social classes from one another. My own observations indicate that within profane leisure spaces, social class differentiations become most manifest.

Not only luxurious leisure spaces or activities alienate wealthy Egyptians from other social segments of the population. Their residential locations do so as well. Cairo is one city by which the process of modernization has segmented its space into residential areas distinguished by class and occupation. During the last decade in particular, there has been a major boom in the growing establishments of elitist residential compounds that mainly cater for the rich. These exclusive compounds, resorts and neighborhoods, of what are commonly referred to in the social science literature as ‘gated communities’. They are known for their high quality and expensive services/facilities that mainly compromise of green space, safety and free from all the hazards of Cairo. Certainly a number of my informants reside or plan to move to expensive compounds like Katameya Heights, Mountain View, Hyde Park and many others. A villa in these compounds costs

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217 The wealthy and powerful mostly reside in the center of the city, along the Nile banks, and on the jazira or the island in the middle of the river. Middle class professionals, bureaucrats and merchants live opposite to these areas, particularly on Roda Island (south of the jazira), the west bank of the Nile, and a narrow passage extending to the northeast from downtown. Skilled workers, petite bourgeoisie, and low-income white collar workers reside in areas bordering downtown area on its north and east sides. They also live on the area paralleling the northern edge of the middle class zone that runs north-east of town. The fourth residential areas is mainly for artisans, peddlers, semi and unskilled laborers, and a young people with education but with low salaries. They live in a narrow strip of urban land along the east bank of the Nile, which is sepaerated by half by the upper class downtwon and governmental districts. This social class also occupies what remains of the medieval city, located due east of the downtown elite and middle class zones. The fifth residential area, comprised of the most deprived social group, is occupied by villagers whose lands has been taken over by urbanization, and by people who have migrated from rural areas to the city. They dwell on the eastern edge of Cairo, in the qarafa or where the old cemeteries are located. For more on urban and domestic space in modern Egypt, see Campo (1991).
no less than 4 million Egyptian pounds (€535,000) which only a minority of Egyptians can afford.

Gated communities can thus be interpreted as an ongoing process of separating the poor from the rich. As Mitchell (1988) clearly exemplified ‘The identity of the modern city (Cairo) is created by what it keeps out. Its modernity is something contingent upon the exclusion of its opposites’. This perspective is also shared by El-Sheshtawy (2006) who argues that global trends in Arab cities tend to ‘wall some in and keep others out’.

In contrast, many Ramadan charity projects, like the distribution of Ramadan packages, are executed in areas known for extreme poverty. Affluent young volunteers, who are accustomed to lavish settings all year-long, spend long hours in these deprived neighborhoods to provide financial and emotional assistance to the poor. Upper-middle classes volunteers have defined their participation in charity projects implemented in economically deprived areas as an ‘eye-opening experience’. Their exposure to conditions of poverty that many Egyptian live in has confronted them with a social reality that they are normally cut-off. One young wealthy female volunteer stated:

my active involvement at ma'idat al-Rahman in Qalyoubia governorate made me move out of my comfort zone (implying elite neighborhood and lifestyle, ns) and realize how other people are living….not only have I become more sympathetic but also determined to make a positive change (actively seek ways to empower the poor, ns).218

I argue that the increased charity and cooperation, accentuated by the spiritual spirit of Ramadan, may help reduce social class tensions. The lower and middle class Egyptians express ever more feelings of economic frustrations and deprivation. These negative emotions are mainly connected with the growing inequality in income distribution and geographical setting of Cairo, which in its turn is primarily attributed to Sadat’s Infitah.219

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218 This informant participated four times in the organization of a ma'idat al-Rahman in Abu Zaabal city within the Qalyoubia governorate. This city is known for its high poverty rates.
219 According to figures issued by the Central Auditing Agency in 2009, the monthly income of three per cent of Egyptian families is less than LE250 (€31), while the income of 20 per cent of families is less than
The sudden and big rise in opportunities for increasing income and accumulating new wealth which were related with the open-door policies in the mid-1970s, influx of work opportunities in the Gulf countries and the rise in the rate of inflation, have aroused and inspired many Egyptians of making it big into acquiring an immense amount of wealth (Amin, 2006). Some did indeed acquire wealth and were pushed up the social ladder. However, the majority who were unable to make use of the great amount of economic opportunities available at the time got greatly frustrated.220 Especially when the economy started to go down in the early 1980s, with the decrease in job opportunities in the Gulf, many of the rising ambitions built up in the 1970s were confronted with the harsh reality and a feeling of depression and frustrations followed.

According to Benthall (1999) by one giving up part of his wealth to the poor and needy, one purifies the portion that remains; and also the provider liberates himself from the negative qualities of greed and passiveness towards other’s sufferings. The provision of zakat, sadaqa and volunteerism are valuable for the giver, receiver and society overall. I argue further that the needy who receive money or other forms of help from the wealthy, are spared from developing feelings of jealousy, hatred or even violence towards the rich. Philanthropy is thus beneficial in terms of creating a more secure society with less feelings of despise towards the affluent classes.

Charity is particularly needed in Cairo, not only because of the growing income gap between social classes but also due to the geographical setting of the city. In Cairo the rich and the poor reside in relatively close proximity to one another, with the rising trend of gated communities as mentioned earlier. Before the Infitah, landlords were much wealthier than the rest of the people, but then again most resided far away in their mansions. Today with the rise in migration from rural to urban areas, many of the rich and the poor live close to one another and, as a consequence, exposed openly to one another lifestyles. The poor can not help feeling frustrated seeing their wealthy neighbors

LE500 (€62). Moreover, 48 per cent of families are paid between LE500 (€62) to LE1,000 (€122) per month; while 29 per cent of families receive more than LE1,000 (€122) every month.

220 Amin (2006) adds that the increased rate of unemployment in the second half of the 1980s, even among educated university graduates, intensified feelings of frustration and disappointment among a large portion of the population who tied large dreams with education for themselves and their families, as a pathway for social advancement. People’s increased frustration is reflected by the rising rate of crimes, number and applicants intending to emigrate, corruption, families splitting up etc.
living lavish lives in safe and bountiful areas. The poor’s growing frustration has indeed caused various riots, theft and, even, murder incidents during recent years. Those residing at gated compounds or affluent areas were the prime targets.

The perspective that Ramadan philanthropy creates a more secure society was also raised in a press interview with Economist Galal Amin. Amin theorized that rich Egyptians organize Ramadan charity projects, such as mawa'id al-Rahman, to ‘make the poor quiet and attain God’s forgiveness for their astronomical profits’ (El-Noshokaty, 2006: 14). Keeping the poor ‘quiet’ in this viewpoint means that the rich wish to keep themselves secure from theft or other crime that the economically marginalized groups may commit.

In this section I argued that the affluent youths’ involvement in charity work helps reduce the heightened sense of social injustice, connected with the growing inequality in income distribution and geographical setting of Cairo. Upper-middle class youth who choose to volunteer at Ramadan philanthropic projects hold positive views on their leisure experiences. For the lower classes, they express gratitude towards the much-needed charity received in Ramadan. However, the poor’s financial inability to access most of the profane commodities and facilities the affluent enjoy in Ramadan triggers feelings of despair and resentment.

4. Social Classes and Re-affirmation of Social Class Hierarchy

Ramadan is a limited period of time where the social class hierarchy is suspended in specific leisure spaces as presented previously, while other times it is re-affirmed. The religious-oriented leisure activities promoted and pursued in Ramadan certainly do celebrate the values of equality and social cohesion of the umma. Nevertheless, the high financial demands of the holy month, expensive Ramadan-related commodities and

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221 People’s frustration reached peak after a disaster hit the shantytown of Dweqa at the foot of the Moqattam hills that took the lives of more than 60 people. Some large rocks from the Moqattam hills fell onto the unauthorized slum area. The incident occurred first week of September 2008, about the 6th day of Ramadan. People blamed the government for its failure to acknowledge the existence of slums by failing to provide some basic health and safety-related services. For more information on the disaster, refer to Nkrumah (2008).

222 Exclusive compounds in Cairo have become main target for robbers. See, Shama’s (2008) coverage of recent murder of two college girls at Al-Nada Compound, Sheikh Zayed City in Cairo.
facilities reaffirm social class differences. The lower-middle class informants, in particular, feel excluded from Ramadan festivities as they can not afford most of the profane commodities and recreation facilities available in the public sphere.

What I find particularly interesting about Galal Amin’s (2000) conceptualization of social mobility in Egypt is that it does not only help explain the lower classes frustrations but also upper-classes’ elevated desire to display wealth. On the one hand, the lower classes cannot help but envy and despise those upper class youth whose parents acquired enormous wealth in the 1970s. On the other hand, the youth whose parents have newly acquired wealth are keen to show-off their affluence to declare their ascendance to a higher social class. This is translated in terms of intensified consumption of high-expense leisure activities and commodities.

In *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, Thorstein Veblen (1899) was the first to discuss the idea of conspicuous consumption – the acquisition and display of expensive items to suggest wealth and attract attention to one’s wealth. Conspicuous consumption is also known as status consumption, the idea of consumption as a means to outwardly demonstrate wealth, particularly in the public sphere. Certainly, all the expensive Ramadan-related goods and expensive resemble for the rich social groups what Csikszentimihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) may call, ‘forms of power that consists of respect, consideration, and envy from others’.

In this section I explain how Ramadan has become a time for conspicuous consumption for the rich and increased frustration for the poor.

4.1 Food commodities

Egypt’s deteriorating economy, marked by a weak currency and sudden rise in prices of food before the holy month begins, casts a pall over Ramadan. For almost all Egyptian

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223 In his book Veblen depicts the behavioral characteristics of the nouveau riche, a class emerging in the 19th century as a result of the accumulation of wealth during the second Industrial revolution. Relevant to my research, nouveau riche represents Egyptian upper-middle classes or those with newly acquired wealth that use their affluence to manifest social power whether real or perceived.

224 Many researchers in the fields of psychology, sociology, marketing and economics have examined the notion of status consumption. See for example, Farrell (2004) and Deacon (2002).
Muslims, Ramadan becomes the time for high food consumption. Before the holy month begins, every year masses flock the supermarkets and food stalls to buy all kinds of commodities to prepare the popular traditional Ramadan delicacies and drinks. With the increased demand for all range of food items as the holy month approaches, it is not surprising that their prices rise considerably.

This in turn has compelled low-income households to give up some cooking staples and many of the popular Ramadan dishes. Prices of almost all essential food ingredients, particularly those used to make famous Ramadan dishes such as nuts and apricots, continue to increase immensely every year. Some low-income informants said that they are no longer able to eat the traditional Ramadan deserts like konafa and qatayef.

A few years back many people used to depend on chicken, instead of meat, which is relatively much less expensive. Since the bird flue hit Egypt and damaged the Egyptian poultry industry in February 2006, many must make do with a diet lacking in protein. The price of chicken more than doubled from LE 5 (€0.6) to LE 11 (€1.4) per kilo, which is considered unreasonably high price for low income families. Moreover, the low supply of poultry raised the demand on meat, which in turned hiked the price of meat from LE 30 (€3.8) to LE 38 (€4.7) per kilo.

Some low-income respondents said that Ramadan no longer has the same festive unique ‘taste’ as it did years ago. Particularly families with a monthly income of less than LE 1,000 (€122) protest that their needs always exceed their salaries. This is especially

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225 A study released by the National Council for Social Research in 2009 estimates that 83 per cent of Egyptian families change their eating habits during the month. Consumption of sweet products increases by almost 67 per cent, that of meat and chicken by 63 per cent. Sales of nuts, a seasonal favorite, are up by 25 per cent. A second study, this time by the Central Agency for Public Mobilisation and Statistics (CAPMAS), claims that during the first week of Ramadan 2.7 billion loaves of baladi bread, 10,000 tons of beans and 40 million chickens were consumed.
pertinent during Ramadan since most families shop and cook food dishes which are traditional *iftar* mainstays. In addition, during Ramadan the household budget inflates to accommodate additional amounts of meat and poultry, as well as extra *iftar* guests of family and friends. To express the financial load that Ramadan poses, a poor old man I was interviewing in Boulaq pointed at another elderly man carrying a heavy *ful* (beans) jar on his back, and said ‘Ramadan for me is like this fellow, a burden on my weak back’.

Lower classes’ feelings of frustration are further aroused as a result of the immense advertising on television of luxurious commodities that are unattainable to the masses watching. Food commercials, ranging from butter, frozen foods and drinks vastly increase during Ramadan. One may argue that with the high poverty rates in Egypt, it is illogical that expensive commodities are promoted. The large Egyptian population, despite the high percentage of poor people, still has a sizeable buying power. What is relevant here is that a high percentage of the poor cannot help but feel emotionally distressed, by viewing highly-expensed food items being promoted on television and print media.

Independent Arab media criticize the high promotion of extravagant food items in Ramadan. In *Sabah el-Kheir* magazine (27 September, 2007), a comic was published that exhibited a poor Egyptian family eating on the floor and wearing ragged clothing while watching television; on television it showed a presenter saying ‘Dish of the day is very easy…Grilled lamb with stuffed turkey…with fried shrimps and duck….and maroon glace for dessert’ (See image 13). The ingredients for the food recipes announced are very expensive and thus financially inaccessible for most Egyptians like the ones shown in the comic.

The poor women whom I interviewed said that their prayers were mainly concerned with asking God to grant them mercy, patience and strength to be able to withstand the financial burdens Ramadan imposes on them. One informant told me that she is into the habit of visiting shrines of saints to pray to God to make her and her family ‘survive’ the high Ramadan expenses. Low-income Christian informants also complain of the ‘unrealistic’ price increase during Ramadan. Below are some people’s grievances towards the inflated prices of food commodities during the holy month:
Long time ago when Ramadan used to end we used to feel very sad...but now we feel more relaxed when it is about to end as we no longer have to struggle with meeting the feast’s demands...of purchasing over-priced food ingredients and inviting people over for iftar.

Ramadan, with all its beauty, comes with a huge financial burden. Everything is very expensive now! The 1 kilo of meat used to cost 15 piasters (€0.02) now it cost LE 35(€4.4). In Ramadan the price even goes higher!

I wish I could invite my relative for iftar or sahur more often, but I wouldn’t be able to afford it since it would eat up all my salary.

Many cartoons in newspapers, especially at the start of Ramadan, show characters looking strained because Ramadan was starting at the same time that schools began. One cartoon showed a man asking his colleague, who has just received his LE 300 monthly salary, whether he was going to use the earned money for paying tuition or purchasing Ramadan goods. The man replied, ‘I will flip a coin’; meaning he would have to choose one option as he could not afford to pay for both.

Ahmed, 30-year old teacher working at a public school in Boulaq area, told me that many of his primary school pupils complained that their parents refused to buy them new uniforms as they spent most of the money buying Ramadan goods. Moreover, Ramadan in 2006-2008 arrived when household budgets are already overstretched after families have just returned from the summer holiday.226

In response to the public outcry over inflated prices during the holy month, the Egyptian government has executed several projects to help out. The government sponsors several low-priced food exhibitions in Sha`ban or at the start of the holy month. Dr. Aly El-Meselhy, Minister of Economics, stated in a press conference after the grand opening of a Ramadan products exhibition in Nasr City, Cairo 2007 that the government will open similar exhibitions in more Egyptian governorates that offer Ramadan products with up to 25% discount (Saed, 2007). I have witnessed the opening of these exhibitions in Cairo; they mainly comprised of food commodities and school-related materials.

Moreover, it was reported in the local press that Prime Minister Ahmed Nazif’s cabinet decided in September 2007 to raise the budget allocated for food subsides from LE 9.7

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226 To clarify, while the rich go on long-haul holidays outside of Egypt or at luxurious beach resorts in the north-coast; the poor go visit their families in the country-side or take day-trips to the zoo or other free/cheap public recreation areas.
billion (€1.2 billion) to LE 14.4 billion (€1.8 billion) for fiscal year 2007/2008 (El-Fiqi, 2007).

Another government endeavor was the launch of a public campaign on Egyptian national television in Ramadan during 2008, aiming to raise awareness on the related dangers of over-spending and lavish consumption of food commodities. Overconsumption is presented as unnecessary, wasteful and costly, as it takes place at the expense of saving and investment, and creates too heavy a burden on the balance of payments. The series of public advertisements is based on two fictional characters Madame *fashkhara manzar* and her husband. The advertisements start with the fact that consumption reaches its height in Ramadan compared to other months of the years. One advertisement series shows Madame *fashkhara* over-buying at a supermarket, in another one she is giving her chef an endless list of dishes to prepare for *sahur* and in another one it displays the immense number of dishes she had prepared for an *iftar* social gathering. At the end of the advertisement it shows Madame *fashkhara* throwing out a lot of wasted food and a public announcer saying ‘*Elly yewla` el-as`ar wa-yekhreb el-geyub howwa el-fashkara wa el-manzara ya habub*’ or ‘What raises prices and ruins the pockets (makes you go bankrupt) is the desire to show-off, my love’.

The commercialization of Ramadan dishes has also undermined the communal spirit that characterized domestic cooking. Some elderly men and women explained that long time ago it was a social event in their rural villages for women to exchange recipes, cook together and compare each other’s sweet dishes in Ramadan. A 56-year old woman who used to live in a rural village explained that women in her village used to take pride in their cooking and felt highly gratified when people complimented their food. Today people take pride in their buying power or ability to purchase expensive products,

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227 Besides raising awareness on the risks of over consumption of food, several other social campaigns were launched in Ramadan 2008 related to various problems in Egypt. Before the holy month started by weeks, Cairo streets were filled with billboards with several slogans that started with the ‘*nohkom `a`lena…*’ or ‘when we make wise/well-thought out decisions…’, we can ‘*net`alem kollena*’ or ‘we can all get an education’, ‘*nakol kollena*’ or ‘we can all eat’ etc. Another television campaign in Ramadan 2008 rose awareness on the importance of saving electrical energy. It showed the family saving a lot of money by not wasting electric energy at home. The money saved was used to purchase a new computer. The advertisement concluded with a strong tagline that stated ‘*Elli yehsebha sahh ye`ishha sahh*’ or ‘Whomever calculates it right, lives right’.

228 *Fashkhara manzar* are Egyptian-arabic words meaning the desire to display wealth in an arrogant manner.
including Ramadan pastries. Below is an interesting discussion between two men expressing their views on that issue:

Now people no longer bake their own Ramadan dishes or sweets. They prefer to buy them ready-made and showoff of where they have purchased them. They brag that they’ve bought this *basbusa* from el-Abd or La Poire sweet shops (pricey confectionary stores, ns). They buy the sweets from there to boast that the box (the stores’ packages carries their distinctive logos and names, ns) they are carrying is from these expensive shops. It is an image thing (Mustafa 58)

Today women are even embarrassed to admit that they prepare their own sweet dishes. Preparing their own food is no longer a source of pride. My mother used to compete with her neighbors to see who makes a better *basbusa* in Ramadan. Today women show off about who has a husband or father who can afford to buy *basbusa* from expensive sweet shops and hire them domestic labor (Hajj Ahmed, 63).

In relation to some people’s desire’s to show-off, one can argue that the goods and services consumed or aspired to by the newly rising classes do not merely satisfy certain consumption needs but serve a much more important social function as symbols of social advancement. In other words, buying Ramadan pastries from the posh La Poire shop or other forms of conspicuous consumption reflects one’s ability to buy expensive items and thus reveals social class affiliation.

It thus became apparent that during Ramadan access and consumption of food commodities re-affirm social class distinctions due to several factors. The commercialization of food during the holy month greatly increases its prices that the poor mass population can not afford. As for wealthy Egyptians, the purchasing of high-expense food commodities serves as an important status symbol for their wealth. Finally, the increased commercialization of Ramadan sweet pastries has diminished the communal leisure activity of exchanging recipes and cooking together.

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229 One of my interviewees in Boulaq recited a story about a man who lost all his money in the stock market. To maintain his ‘social prestige’ among his neighbors, he insisted in putting the little money he had into luxurious commodities like cellular phones. My interviewee jokingly said that in Ramadan he likes to walk in the neighborhood carrying an empty box of el-Abd pastry store to show off that he is still capable of buying from that expensive store.
4.2 Recreation facilities

Social class defined in terms of economic opportunities and differences in power within societies is a key determinant in access to profane leisure activities.²³⁰ Macleod (1992) and Saad (2006) note that the different lifestyles of Egyptian upper, middle and lower classes is reflected in their overall consumption patterns. My MSc research (Saad, 2006) concluded that upper classes in Egypt are generally influenced by Western lifestyles, travel extensively, go on long-haul holidays and access elitist leisure facilities. These social classes have enough discretionary income to own resources to ensure privacy such as membership in exclusive sporting clubs. The middle classes are more limited in travel mobility and recreation spending in relation to the upper classes. Finally, the lower classes’ leisure is principally based on social gatherings within private domains.

In comparison to Western culture however, leisure in Middle Eastern countries generally involves lower level of spending (Martin and Mason, 2003). The authors explain this as being consistent with the continued emphasis on traditional leisure activities with low spending content. This notably includes time spent with family and friends for socialization and sharing of food. This theory holds particularly true for Ramadan with increased prominence on family gatherings and communal religious activities. Nonetheless, I argue that wide ranges of profane leisure activities, particularly after iftar time, are commercial in nature, hence not equally accessible by everyone.

After iftar and tarawih time the young upper-middle classes frequented public leisure venues like Kheyam Ramadan, cafes, sporting club etc. Kheyam Ramadan as discussed in chapter four caters essentially for the affluent classes who can afford their expensive entrance tickets and service charge. There, the rich can enjoy an extravagant sahur meal and five star service while listening to live and popular local singers. The same applies for restaurants that serve iftar and sahur where a high minimum charge, sometimes reaching LE 200 (€24.8) is imposed (See image 14). Thus, one can theorize that the relatively well-off exhibit their high standard of living in their profane leisure activities and the exclusive venues they have access to. I further argue that the rich’s increased demand for luxurious leisure has triggered the provision of novel types of leisure practices and spaces in connection with the holy month.

The leisure of the poor in Ramadan is however more devoted to time consuming, cheap and home-oriented leisure, mainly television watching. Unlike the affluent classes who own private cars and have high discretionary incomes, poverty puts heavy constraints on the poor’s spatial mobility. In Boulaq district for example, I observed that after its Muslim residents break their fast the males would spend the rest of the evening at the local ahawi that serve low-priced items. For example, a cup of Turkish coffee cost no more than 30 piasters (€0.04), which is much less than a 10 Egyptian pounds (€1.22) cup of coffee at the trendy coffee shops available in urban Cairo. As for women, they would spend their free time socializing at home or visiting near-by family members and friends. Television also seemed to be the center of the lower classes’ recreation and aired Ramadan shows a regular topic of conversation. Television sets were stationed in almost all households and traditional ahawis I have visited in Boulaq area.

Therefore, one can conclude that exclusive entrance to profane leisure venues in Ramadan re-affirms social class distinctions. This sense of ‘communitas’ or unity that signifies rituals, as proposed by Turner (1969), may have become undermined through the commercialization of profane leisure during the sacred month.
5. **Muslim and Christian relations during Ramadan**

The recreation aspect of Ramadan does not only unite Muslims but in some respects, Muslims with Christians as well. Christians obviously do not engage in religious activities, however, they heartily participated in numerous profane Ramadan activities. Many Christians take part in the festivities of the month by joining their Muslim friends for *iftar*, *sahur*, neighborhood decorations etc. Out of respect for those fasting, many Christians also abstain from eating or drinking in public during the fasting hours. Below are some Muslims’ reflections on how Christians take part in Ramadan’s festivities:

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Muslims and Christians get closer during Ramadan. You will find all Christians in the neighborhood joining us (Muslims, ns) in celebrating Ramadan by taking part in *iftar*, *sahur* and socialization at cafes. There is a brotherly spirit between all Egyptians during Ramadan.

On the *iftar* table there is no difference between a Muslim and Christian.

The Christians I interviewed in Cairo strongly assured me that they look forward to Ramadan as much as Muslims do. They noted that they did indeed share with their fellow Muslims the festivity of the holy month, just as their Muslim neighbors share in Christian holidays. They particularly enjoyed the joyous special Ramadan dishes, soap operas and shows aired during the holy month. Some also added that they particularly enjoyed the late night Ramadan outings such as hanging out at cafes and visiting al-Husayn area in Old Cairo district. A few Christians also volunteered at Ramadan charity projects.

On an official level, the head of the Coptic Orthodox Church pope El-Baba Shenouda III is known to host a *ma'idat al-Rahman* named mutual love (i.e. between Muslims and Christians) every Ramadan. Moreover, in his attempt to promote the new national view that religion is to God and the nation is for all individuals, pope Shenouda III hosts every Ramadan an *iftar* party where a wide range of important politicians, celebrities and Muslim preachers attend, including of the *sheikh* Azhar Mohammed Sayed Tantawi. One *iftar* event organized by the Pope, for example, was held at a grand church in Abbasia, Cairo, early October 2007. The Lions Club social organization also
hosted a similar iftar where they invited the Coptic Pope, prominent Christians and Muslim scholars (El Hawary, 2007).\textsuperscript{231} At the event, Shenouda delivered a speech on the importance of national unity regardless of religious affiliation. Hany Aziz, head of Lions organization, was reported in a press article stating that ‘our country resembles a human body, with a number of different organs all working together for the overall benefit of the body’ (El Hawary, 2007:9).\textsuperscript{232} These different organs represent the various religions and sects that exist in Egypt, where harmony is important between all these various sects or ‘organs’ for the overall benefit of the nation.

It is worth noting that throughout the last few years, the Egyptian public media has directed more attention on promoting mutual friendship and cooperation among Muslims and Christians in Egypt. In an article published in \textit{el-Malaf} newspaper (11 November, 2006) titled ‘Christians in Egypt share Ramadan festivities’ the reporter notes that Christians’ contribution to Ramadan is not limited to sharing in festivities but includes charity as well, and that Egyptian Muslims and Christians are brothers and sisters. This media campaign started and was encouraged by religious leaders (Muslims and Christians) and senior government officials. This public media trend was further complemented by the government’s declaration in 2002 that the Coptic Christmas on the 7\textsuperscript{th} of January is a national holiday in Egypt.\textsuperscript{233} These national efforts were mainly initiated to attenuate Muslims-Coptic tensions in Egypt.

Western media have provided many reports to prove that Copts are discriminated against and do not receive equal political rights or privileges like the Muslim majority. There was an incident in October 2005, when an angry mob laid siege to St. George’s Church in Alexandria claiming that the church distributed a video that slanders Islam. Parts of the church were burned and a nun was badly wounded as she got stabbed. The peak of sectarian violence came in 16\textsuperscript{th} April 2006 when gangs of young Muslim and Christian men roamed the streets in Alexandria burning cars and shops as they exchanged Molotov cocktails and rocks. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that the 2006 Ramadan witnessed extensive media coverage stressing Coptic Christians’ positive contributions.

\textsuperscript{231} Lions club is an international social organization. For more information, visit http://www.lionsclubs.org/EN/index.php
\textsuperscript{232} Hany Aziz’s speech refers to a text in the New Testament (1 Corinthians 12:12).
\textsuperscript{233} According to the Julian calendar on which the Coptic Orthodox ecclesiastical calendar is based
during Ramadan and, continuously reminding people that all Egyptians stand equal regardless of faith.

Furthermore, some of the young female informants referred to Islamic historical examples to show that their religion commands respect towards others regardless of religious affiliation. To prove their point, some recited historic examples of the Prophet Mohammed who is believed to have expressed acts of kindness towards the Jewish community. In addition some noted that the Muslim warrior Saladin was known not to maim, kill or retaliate against those non-Muslims whom he defeated. A few also referred to the Battle of Badr in terms of the way non-Muslim prisoners of war were treated kindly by the Muslim warriors.\textsuperscript{234}

To sum up, within the context of the Egyptian nation state focus is directed on citizenship rather than religious affiliation. A nation or \textit{watan} in that respect is based on inter-religious tolerance and social cohesion to maintain public order, a prerequisite to allow the nation to compete on a global scale. Civil wars or religious aggression certainly do not help the Egyptian economy or its chances of development. More on the roles of the nation-state during the holy month will be presented in the next chapter. I will specifically examine how so-called ‘authentic’ Islamic values and Ramadan traditions are made compatible with rationality, economic advancement and, even, modern consumer preferences.

\textbf{6. Conclusion}

In this chapter I used the concept of \textit{umma} as an overall frame of reference to examine how social cohesion and equality, in terms of access to leisure resources, is redefined in

\textsuperscript{234} For more on the Battle of Badr see surat al-Anfal 67, 68, 69. The majority of religious scholars agree that the captives of the Battle of Badr were exchanged for Muslim captives in enemy hands. Another option was for the captive’s family to pay a ransom in accordance to his financial situation. Another form of ransom assumed an educational dimension; most of the Makkans, unlike the Madinese, were literate and so each prisoner who could not afford the ransom was entrusted with ten children to teach them the art of writing and reading. Once the child was proficient enough, the instructor would be set free. According to the \textit{ulama}, the example of Badr not only shows that Islamic beliefs commands respect towards non-Muslim prisoners of war but also the allowance or encouragement for Muslims to learn from others, regardless of faith.
contemporary Ramadan leisure practices. The holy month is a liminal time period where social boundaries are suspended in some instances and re-affirmed in other occasions.

Gender, social class and national boundaries were the main focus for this chapter. It was evident that during Ramadan, women have higher access to the public sphere in comparison to other times of the year. Leisure activities that are spiritual and philanthropic in nature suspend or inverse social class differentiation. Social class distinctions are, however, re-affirmed when a high admission fee or price is imposed on a profane leisure activity or product that can only be accessed by the wealthy. In relation to the nation-state, the notion of Muslim-Christian cohesion is propagated in Ramadan. The Egyptian government, public media and religious scholars adopt various strategies for circulating and promoting Muslim-Christian partnership.

More specifically, in this chapter I examined how capitalism in the context of Ramadan and its communal nature is either undermined or reaffirmed based on the leisure setting. Consumption has led to the acceleration of the pace of life and has enhanced individualization within families, which is reflected in individual leisure patterns that members lead throughout the year. Another implication of the prevalence of capitalism is that the young are more reluctant in investing time in charity work. They are more interested in capturing new capital opportunities and advancing in social status.

Nonetheless, the communal, religious and charitable nature of the holy month slows the pace of life and encourages social cohesion. In Ramadan, youngsters engage more in family leisure, mingle with local community and invest more time in philanthropic projects. I specifically argued that charity work helps reduce the heightened sense of social injustice connected with the growing inequality in income distribution and geographical setting of Cairo.

The unifying leisure aspect of the holy month does not merely bring people together but may also have long-term consequences on young women participants and society as a whole. Communal leisure spaces in Ramadan did not only serve spiritual and recreation purposes but also introduces women to new sets of knowledge. The mosque for example was a place for prayers, socialization and also an arena where members of subordinated social groups (women) circulated new counter discourses to oppose ‘unjust’ patriarchal rules and political leaderships.
As expected, the communal nature of the holy month may not always be welcome by everyone. For men who adhere to the traditional patriarchal discourses women’s frequent leisure outside the home may pose as a threat to their authority. Throughout the year, males adopt various kinds of strategies to constrain women’s access to the public sphere, mainly sexual harassment. The spiritual nature of Ramadan, however, restricts acts of sexual violence against women. The fact that during Ramadan Cairo streets are safer and women are motivated to engage in religious/philanthropic activities outside the home domain, greatly increases their access to the public sphere. In that perspective, the sacred nature of the holy month can be interpreted as a source for women’s empowerment.

The government also fears threats of political upheavals initiated at some leisure spaces and encouraged by the communal-religious spirit of Ramadan. Government authorities, for example, apply various restrictions at mosques in Ramadan as I will describe in the next chapter. It becomes apparent that the government initiates various endeavors to maintain its authority and maintain public peace.

Finally, it became clear that the commercialization of some Ramadan leisure resources alienates the lower classes from participation. The high rate of social mobility, mainly hastened since the *Infitah* policies, explains the intense feelings of frustration that the poor express for their inability to purchase or gain admittance to many expensive leisure resources. It also explains the young rich people’s (whose parents have acquired relatively new wealth) desires to display wealth through boasting their high access to exclusive Ramadan commodities and recreation facilities.