Ramadan culture in modern Cairo
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CHAPTER SEVEN

AUTHENTICITY-THE REVITALIZATION OF ‘TRADITION’ IN THE NATION-STATE AND A CONSUMERIST CONTEXT

In Ramadan of 2009 Pepsi Cola Company launched a new brand that found significant success among upper-middle class Egyptians. The brand named Mirinda karkade (Hibiscus tea) was sold in cans all over Cairo supermarkets and kiosks. Karkade is a traditional Egyptian drink that people highly associate with Ramadan and one of the favorite drinks for the iftar and sahur. The drink is commonly sold by street vendors in plastic bags or in large glass containers for a low price (LE 0.50 or € 0.07 per glass). It is usually served chilled with ice and contains much sugar. Although most upper-middle classes enjoy the traditional drink, for hygiene and health reasons they prefer not to purchase it in the streets. The elite prepare the drink themselves with clean ingredients and only little sugar. However, the time consuming preparation process may be a hurdle in presentday rushed lifestyles. The introduction of the Mirinda karkade resolved the elitists’ dilemma by meeting their consumption preferences and modern schedules. Although at a relatively high price (LE 2.25 or €0.3 per can), the renowned Ramadan drink is now available to them ready-made in clean containers, and with a guaranteed quality taste. The advertisement campaign launched by Pepsi Cola company has further enhanced the drink’s appeal to its affluent targeted customers. In the television advertisement a waiter is shown at a traditional coffee house or ahwa baladi serving the Mirinda karkade cans to a group of youngsters. The waiter addresses them in a comic tone, telling them that they are the generation of the ‘Facetok’ (referring to Facebook social utility website). He then asks them if they wish to play ‘Una’ game (referring to Uno game of cards) rather than the traditional game of backgammon. The groups of young customers are shown either reading or working on their laptops as they drink the Miranda karkade in cans. The campaign was so successful that the product continued to sell out almost immediately in all Cairo stores throughout Ramadan. A marketing

235 Karkade drink is commonly believed by Egyptians to have been consumed in ancient Egypt as a preferred drink of pharaohs.
executive employed in the Pepsi company informed me that the company is considering
to offer a Diet Mirinda *karkade*, with low sugar and calorie content, next Ramadan.

The popularity of the Mirinda *karkade* product can be attributed to its successful
innovative marketing strategy to restyle the traditional Ramadan drink to match the target
markets’ modern tastes and overall lifestyle. This strategy was successful since it fulfilled
modern Muslim consumers’ desire for the traditional drink while accommodating for
contemporary consumption preferences. The success of this particular television
commercial can also be credited to how it redefined cultural values associated with the
traditional *ahwa*. The images depicted in the advertisement greatly contrast with the
common illustration of people hanging out at the traditional *ahwa*, smoking *shisha*, and
sitting idle for long hours. Leisure time spent at the *ahwa* is commonly associated with
non-productive and wasteful pastime that the upper-middle classes oppose. In contrast,
the Mirinda advertisement portrayed young successful Egyptian citizens reading and
embracing modern technology while seated at the local *ahwa*. This merge between
authenticity (Islamic month of fasting and traditional Egyptian *ahwa*), modern
consumption demands (convenience, cleanliness and healthiness) and economic progress
(commitment to literacy, high-tech technology and other competitive skills) underlies
Egypt’s modernization process as I will discuss in this chapter.

The intensification of globalization and consumerism has often been conceived as leading
to cultural uniformity or the McDonaldization of the world. Yet, the successful
campaign by the Pepsi Cola Company to launch a restyled Ramadan drink illustrates that
while a certain cultural homogenization occurs, these changes also encourage local quests
for authenticity. As can be observed throughout the world, Egypt’s fast integration in a
globalizing economic system goes hand in hand with the revitalization and reinvention of
local practices and markers of ethnic and national identity (cf. Zubaida, 2004a). This
quest for authenticity becomes particularly intense during the fasting month. Ramadan
appears to be the ‘ideal’ time for members of the *umma* to ‘re-enchant’ their world

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236 I borrow the term McDonaldization from Ritzer’s (1998) famous book.
through reviving what they perceive as original and genuine forms of their religious and cultural heritage.²³⁷

Claiming authenticity (asala/taqlidi) within the Egyptian context I argue is based on interconnected trends that inform upper-middle class women’s leisure patterns in Ramadan for what they perceive as authentic (asil) traditions and religious values. One trend emphasizes an aesthetication process of traditions to fulfill people’s nostalgia for glorious past civilizations. This is mainly accomplished through the commodification of historical, national and religious traditions. Another modernist trend adopts a developmental approach whereby the nation-states, and its subsidiaries, promote an image of an authentic Egyptian-Muslim citizen who is economically progressive and yet remains committed to past traditions and religious values.

In the first section of the chapter I will reflect on the concept of authenticity within the Egyptian context. Special attention will be directed towards how the nation-state aims to position authentic religious/traditional values as compatible with constituents of economic progress. This modernist discourse comes to the fore in examining various government initiatives to promote the image of a rational, civilized and religious-traditional citizen who stands for ‘true’ authenticity in Ramadan. I will then examine the consumption of what young upper-middle class women perceive as authentic forms of their culture. I will argue that while the quest for authenticity leads these young women to appropriate products that are usually associated with the poor and rural population; in the process such products are transformed in order to be able to stand for new positive and aesthetic values. Finally, I will present how the lower-classes perceive the so-called authentic leisure practices of the wealthy, and in turn, their own leisure experiences with what they view as authentic Ramadan practices. My analysis point out that authentication is an ambivalent process of negotiations, both between different social groups and within individual selves.

²³⁷ The term ‘re-chant’ is meant to stand in opposition to Max Weber’s ‘the disenchantment of the world’ which he holds accountable to secularization, commercialization, and the loosening of bonds of family and community. For more information on this concept, see Weber (1946).
1. The Egyptian Nation-State and its Modernist Project

In the West, modernity emphasizes discontinuity as a means of setting the stage for rational thinking, or what Harvey (1989:16) defines as ‘creative destruction’. While Egyptian modernity is also rationalist, it puts a greater emphasis on maintaining continuity between present and past. In its contemporary Egyptian sense, rationalism is defined as a comprehensive approach based on the ‘presentation of society and its values in the form of a coherent system of laws, regularities and deductive values’ (Schielke, 2006:107). Arab constructs of modernity are accepted as legitimate only if they are continuations of the past and at the same time bound with ideas of economic progress and rationality. At the same time, traditions are only appreciated as ‘authentic’ if they are bound with the idea of progress and rationality.

In that perspective, I adopt Deeb’s (2006), Salamandra’s (2004) and Armbrust’s (2001) viewpoints that in the Arab world, new modern practices and local traditions are more likely to be interconnected than opposed. In the words of Walter Armbrust, the modernist project in Egypt aims to unite progress and authenticity; there is ‘no rejection of tradition, and therefore none of the uncomfortable dislocation of European Modernism’ (1996: 191).

The same approach applies to how the Egyptian nation-state positions religion within its modernization endeavors. Asad (2003) notes that Egypt as a secular state does not mean the exclusion of religion from the public sphere but rather giving religion a certain meaning and functionality. In terms of government policies, modernity should be guided by ethical principles laid down by religion and religion must be capable of being put in the service of the nation’s development (cf. Schielke 2006; Lughod 2005; Armbrust 2001 and Salamandra 2004). In that perspective the nation-state controls how religious rituals and traditions are portrayed within the public sphere to ensure that they serve its modernization ambitions. In addition, the state embraces local traditions and Islamic practices to consolidate its power amid the Egyptian Muslim population.

Historically speaking, the complementary relationship between cultural/religious traditions and progress can be traced back to at least the early twentieth century. That relationship was readdressed after the July 1952 revolution, when the constitutional
monarchy was abolished and replaced by a republic. At this time the question arose of whether the country should follow the Western model of progress or return to its own roots through inspiration in Egypt’s cultural heritage, with or without a merge of that heritage with the requirements of modernity (Amin, 2000). Judging from late president Gamal Abdel Nasser’s protocols at the time, it was clear that the choice was to follow the course of Western progress while honoring past traditions.238 While Nasser’s political and economic battles against the West did not permit him to openly express his hidden admiration to Western progress, Sadat openly communicated his fascination with Western lifestyle and progress. Similar to Nasser, he continued to embrace traditional culture and honor Islamic festivities and rituals. Sadat also continued to turn to Western nations, particularly USA, for support to the economic and technological development of the country.

The relationship between Egypt’s past and the present was eloquently addressed by President Sadat in *The October Working Paper* (1974), a declaration outlining the philosophical basis of his *Corrective Revolution*:

> While Nasser’s political and economic battles against the West did not permit him to openly express his hidden admiration to Western progress, Sadat openly communicated his fascination with Western lifestyle and progress. Similar to Nasser, he continued to embrace traditional culture and honor Islamic festivities and rituals. Sadat also continued to turn to Western nations, particularly USA, for support to the economic and technological development of the country.

The real challenge confronting peoples with deep-rooted origins who are facing the problem of civilizational progress is precisely how to renovate their civilization. They should not reject the past in the name of the present and should not renounce the modern in the name of the past, but they should take the new without losing sight of their origins (Baker 1978: 47).

The current government utilizes various resources to promote the image of an authentic identity that is progressive, religiously tolerant and that refutes idleness or chaos. Also, it tries to create an image of Egyptian identity that opposes religious extremism and encourages national unity. This notion is magnified particularly in Ramadan, during which the government imposes restrictions on various leisure venues and launches media campaigns that support its modernist project as we shall come to see in the following section.

238 Nasser’s strategy to follow Western economic development can be illustrated in his policies concerning educational and religious institution of al-Azhar. Nasser’s revolutionary government believed that the best way to improve the institution was to transform it into a replica of the modern national universities in the West. Thus modern subjects like medicine and economics were taught in foreign languages along with teaching of Islamic law. The management of al-Azhar’ faculties were assigned to those who held PhD’s from Western universities. All of these actions reaffirm that Nasser held Western progress in high regards (Amin, 2000).
2. Modernizing the Authentic in Ramadan

The Egyptian modernization project essentially pertains to rationalization and progress whereby any religious or authentic traditional habitus visible in the public sphere must be compatible with that discourse. Ramadan leisure practices that are associated with idleness, chaos, illiteracy, backwardness or superstition that threaten the order of society and the state’s authority are discouraged or even abruptly halted by the state, sometimes with the justification that they are un-Islamic or non-nationalist in the first place. The state also makes wide use of the holy month to promote its modernist ideologies such as combating religious extremism and, instead, endorsing religious harmony; encouraging the pursuit of knowledge, education (particularly for women) and other globally competitive skills. Finally, the Egyptian state ensures that a modern image of the city’s physical space is maintained within a controlled and non-chaotic environment. The festive nature of the holy month, in particular, may lead to public disorder and thus calls for strict state control.

State policies, state-owned or supported media and religious preachers are the main entities or mediums that help fulfill the modernist project’s objectives in Ramadan. Egyptians’ increased quest for an ‘authentic’ religious and traditional identity, and accordingly, their change in leisure patterns in Ramadan explains why the government exerts more effort to promote ‘true’ authenticity during the sacred month. Muslims leisure patterns during the holy month and the communal/festive nature of Ramadan activities delineate the kinds of state policies introduced during that month. In addition, they explain the state’s decisions in specifically utilizing religious preachers and the mass media to endorse its modernization ambitions. My main argument in this section is that the modernist project does not only inform the ambitions of the nation-state, but also the young affluent women’s contemporary preferences and outlooks on what stands for ‘true’ authenticity.

\[239\] The modernization project of Egypt is similar to the development pursuits introduced by Latin-America’s government. For example, in Argentina, the ‘enlightenment and rationalization’ project led to the prejudice again and the exclusion of (supposedly backward and superstitious) indigenous groups, the nation’s original inhabitants (Canclini, 1995: xiii).
2.1 State policies

The state plays a major role in executing regulatory practices that mediate relations between modernity and authenticity. The Egyptian government embraces Islam and local traditions as main components of its national identity through various strategies that are specifically played out in Ramadan. Also, extremist Islamist political groups are the most active in promoting their union and cause in Ramadan. Those groups that pose as threats to the government’s authority and modernization of the nation are severely repressed.

Political threats of Islamist groups were first brought to public attention during late president’s Sadat’s governance. During the first years of Sadat’s leadership, the government employed various Muslim organizations and groups for its secular and capitalism initiatives (Springborg, 1989). Sadat formed allegiances with various Islamist groups and granted more power to them within the legal, media and public sector. For instance, the Egyptian state’s proclaimed the *shari`a* as the main source of legislation in the 1980s. Nonetheless, Sadat’s trip to Jerusalem and the Camp David accord ignited opposition from some Islamist groups. While the *Sheikh* al-Azhar publically endorsed the trip, other Muslim groups like the Muslim Brotherhood rejected the treaty and claimed that peace with Israel was forbidden in the Koran (Ajami, 1983). These led to open clashes between the government and many Islamist groups that finally led to the assassination of President Sadat in October 1981 by members of a militant Jihad group.

Sadat’s successor, current president Hosni Mubarak, aware of the political threat that radical and militant Islamic movements may pose on the country’s security and progress, took extreme measures to combat their operations. But his efforts have not been able to prevent various terrorist attacks. These attacks planned by extremist Islamist groups had a profound negative effect on the country’s tourism and economy.

Particularly in Ramadan, Islamist groups intensify their political activities compared to other times of the year (Ghanem, 2007). They make wide use of people’s

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240 For more thorough information on Islamisation activities during Sadat’s era, see Esposito (1984), Dessouki (1981); Springborg (1989); and Siwan (1983).

241 Muslim organizations’ magazines openly attacked Sadat’s policy like *al- Da`wa* (The Call), anti-government leaflets were also distributed all over Cairo, riots and clashes between Islamist groups and the government occurred at that time (Warburg 1982; Hussain 1983). After these clashes Sadat ordered the imprisonment of some fifteen hundreds of his rivals and critics that ranged from members of the Islamist movements to professionals.
increased participation in communal prayers at mosques during Ramadan to promote their mission through delivering speeches and distributing religious tokens there. They are also known for their high philanthropic activism during the holy month, such as hosting banquets of the Merciful and providing food donations at underprivileged neighborhoods.

Accordingly, the Egyptian government takes various measures during the fasting month to limit extremist Islamists’ groups from mobilizing the public and, possibly, taking over power. Mosques have become subject of high surveillance during the holy month. The Minister of Religious Endowments, Dr. Hamdy Zakzok, issued a decision in 2007 prohibiting people from gathering late at mosques (Awad and Sahar, 2007). He also limited the number of mosques permitted to hold tarawih prayers, forbade religious speeches or lessons unless approved by government itself, banned the distribution of religious stickers/posters or booklets and instructed mosques’ officials to report the names of individuals who insisted on carrying out i’tikaf (Ghanem, 2007). No official reason was given, but some suppose that such gatherings, combined with a general feeling of economic or political discontent, could be exploited by Islamist-opposition groups. Moreover, in Ramadan 2007, Cairo governorate officials issued a decree stating that those who intend to host mawa'id al-Rahman must first apply for special permits from the government.

The state’s actions in Ramadan can be interpreted as a means of filtering out those political groups that may threaten national security and its authority, namely fundamentalist groups. There is much evidence that the government fears the growing popularity of many Islamist organizations, and thus aims at the fragmentation and dissociation of the Islamist movement in Egypt (Springborg, 1989; Kramer, 1986; Baker, 1990). The state’s resistance strategy towards Islamist political groups becomes highly condensed during the holy month.

Beside the government’s attempts to limit Islamist groups’ activities in Ramadan, it also uses religion to consolidate power. The holy month becomes a strategic time for the state to express its continuous commitment to Islam. In fact, the Egyptian government has been using religion since the early 1970s to secure its power and mobilize society (Ibrahim 1982; Ahmed 1992). Religion in Egypt has often been used by political leaders
to support their modernization endeavors through drawing correlations between religious rituals or values with their development project.\textsuperscript{242} Mubarak’s government continues to enhance its Islamic credentials through various strategies and policies.\textsuperscript{243} It has executed various propaganda campaigns to promote its image as the custodians of the true Islam (Ghannam, 2000).

In relation to Ramadan, various government officials host \textit{mawa'id al-Rahman} for the purpose of publicizing its loyalty to Islam. This is evident by the large amount of media coverage dedicated to government sponsorship of banquets of the Merciful, free distribution of food packages and other philanthropic activities that the state sponsors. Also, in its effort to maintain peace among different religious groups in the nation, the state launches numerous banquets of the Merciful each year that aim to bring together Muslims and Copts as discussed in previous chapter.

As for popular culture, Egyptian leaders have for long made expressive gestures to declare their affiliation with local traditions. In their public speeches, late presidents Nasser and Sadat continuously stressed that they were affiliated with the common Egyptians. They were photographed in various instances as wearing the traditional \textit{gallabiyya}, boosting that they were born and raised in rural parts of Egypt and embracing the common man (Werner, 1997: 61). The same applies to Mubarak who is frequently depicted as a native by wearing the \textit{gallabiyya} and embracing farmers and common Egyptians. In Ramadan, the government organizes all cultural events held in al-Husayn area, which I will describe later in the chapter.

Another mission of the state, however, is to maintain a modern image of Cairo. In its efforts to modernize the city president, Sadat took great measures to separate affluent

\textsuperscript{242} Egyptian presidents frequently perform the Friday prayers in front of a crowd of photographers and cameras, use the Koran and religious images frequently in their speeches. President Sadat described himself once as a ‘Muslim leader of a Muslim country’ and justified his leadership and development policies as ‘his duty as a Muslim leader’ (Dessouki, 1982: 89-90).

\textsuperscript{243} The Mubarak government publishes its own Islamic newspaper \textit{al-Liwa al-Islami} (The Islamic Banner). Acknowledging further the strength of Muslim sentiment within the country, the government collaborates with the moderate Islamist groups in the country (Al-Sayyid, 1993). Islamist political groups such as Muslim brotherhood are allowed to take part in political and economic life and express their view on the government policies. They are for example allowed to publish newspapers, appear in the media, open schools and manage financial institutions (Esposito and Picatori, 1991). More emphasis has also been placed on religious education in schools and the media. More religious institutions have also become closely associated with the government, such as Al-Azhar and the Ministry of Religious Endowments.
areas from the old poor quarters in the city.\textsuperscript{244} He propagated the image of urban space which should be kept clean and beautiful for the pleasure of the tourists and upper-middle class Egyptians.\textsuperscript{245} Part of that image encompasses maintaining a clean, non-chaotic and organized environment.

With the festivities of the holy month, urban space in Cairo is dramatically transformed with excess traffic congestion, litter, noise until the morning hours and overall chaos. Furthermore, the widespread of the \textit{mawa'id al-Rahman} that attract the poor into elitist neighborhoods certainly discredit the modern image of urban space and may serve as a nuisance for the affluent residents.

Below is a discussion I had with an upper-class lady in her mid twenties who openly criticized the numerous \textit{mawa'id} stationed ‘haphazardly’ in her neighborhood:

\begin{verbatim}
Researcher: Why don’t you like this \textit{ma'idat al-Rahman} placed in your street (pointing to a \textit{ma'ida} set in a luxurious area in the district of Heliopolis in Cairo, ns)?

Respondent: Please don’t get me wrong. I respect those sponsors who offer free \textit{iftar} meals or other charitable activities Ramadan. What I am opposing is the locations of these \textit{mawa'id}.

Researcher: What is wrong with the locations?

Respondent: They are set in areas that are meant to be used exclusively for us (upper-classes, ns)...who understand how to behave in public, respect each other and not cause disorder. But these \textit{mawa'id} attract uneducated villagers who do not respect order.

Researcher: How don’t they respect order?

Respondent: They make a lot of noise, throw garbage in the neighborhood and a few of them flirt with the girls living in the area. They have no respect for Islamic values or order! Islam is a religion of order, peace and logic...science...certainly not chaos and sexual harassment.
\end{verbatim}

This interview reaffirms the common perspective among the affluent that the \textit{mawa'id} may cause disruption to public peace and physical beauty of the area. They interpret their

\textsuperscript{244} For example, around five thousand Egyptian families were moved during the time period 1979-1981 from Boulaq in Central Cairo to public housing projects (\textit{masakin sha'biyya}) constructed in Ain Shams and al-Zawiya al-Hamra neighborhoods (\textit{al-Akhbar}, May 19, 1979:1; quoted in Ghannam:2002).

\textsuperscript{245} To learn more about how modernity privileges the visual in other countries, see Lefebvre (1991) and Scott (1998).
religion as one that supports cleanliness and public order. They commonly referred to the Koran surat al-Baqara 2:222 ‘Allah loves those who turn to Him constantly and He loves those who keep themselves pure and clean’ and noted that many ahadith affirm that cleanliness is a religious virtue. They also believe that any Ramadan-related activities, even charity ones, that challenge public order must be officially limited or controlled.

As a matter of fact, the 2007 law that declares whoever organizes a ma’ida must hold an official permit remains applicable in Ramadan up till today. Government officials declared that this law will help overcome congestion and traffic jam by ensuring that the banquets of the Merciful are spread out. Furthermore, to maintain a physical modern image and public peace within Cairo’s newly gated compounds, no one is allowed to host mawa’id al-Rahman within these residential premises. It thus becomes apparent that exclusion of poor communities is viewed by the Egyptian state and affluent groups as contingent for the modernization image of the city.

Several key points stand out in relation to the government’s control or intervention on how religion is portrayed and propagated within public space in Ramadan. Secularization or the separation of state law and personal morality puts religion within the context of personal belief. In that sense, secularization stresses on religious tolerance by proposing that belief cannot be enforced and that therefore religion, as long as it remains in the private sphere, should be approached impartially by political authorities. In the Western world, secularization is viewed as a pre-requisite for democracy, but in the Middle East it is mostly associated with dictatorship (Roy, 2004). In many Arab countries, including Egypt, the state controls religion within the public sphere, and often ignores or even suppresses traditional and popular religious expressions.²⁴⁶ The state as a political entity thus has the function of defining the acceptable public face of religion. It is authorized to interfere if a person or organization’s expression of belief may lead to a violation of public order, a breach of the public peace. Thus, religion is allowed into the public sphere only if it does not claim to

²⁴⁶ Examples include Kemal Attaturk banning Sufi brotherhoods and, in case of Egypt, government’s control of Azhar and mosques. Roy (2004) notes that the cancellation of the Algerian parliamentary elections of 1992 under the pretense that they would have been won by the Islamists, proves further that in most Muslim countries secularization has run counter to democratization. This may be described as ‘Post-Islamist’ in which the ‘Islamist parenthesis has profoundly altered relationships between Islam and politics by giving the political precedence over the religious in the name of religion itself’ (Roy, 2004: 3).
lay down the law. Based on this understanding of secularism within the Egyptian nation-state, it is understandable why the government exercises its authority over various public leisure spaces and activities in Ramadan.

2.2 Mass media

Part of the modernization strategy of the Egyptian nation-state is to combine progress and Islamic/traditional values to develop religious, rational and civilized citizens. In this section, I particularly focus on the Egyptian mass media which I argue is one of the most important tools for the propagation of the modernist project’s objectives to educate citizens on how best to lead an ‘authentic’ Egyptian-Islamic lifestyle. Since during Ramadan television viewership reaches peak, this telecommunication medium becomes an imperative tool for disseminating nationalistic ideologies.

The Egyptian government utilizes the mass media as an agent for education by interweaving entertainment with messages it wants to pass on to its citizens. In the state-owned television channels, the authentic citizen is always depicted as progressive, yet committed to religious values and national heritage.247 This notion is widely tackled in many Ramadan television series each year. In her discussion of the popular series *I won't Live My Father’s Life*, Abu Lughod (2005: 139) notes that the show’s protagonist stands for the authentic Egyptian who succeeds in finding the right way to live in the present age of radical economic and political transformation. It is commonly believed that those who became rich very fast during the *Infitah* forgot the values of the popular or *sha’bi* environment such as fraternity, honesty and family values. The protagonist, however, who became a millionaire in a short period of time manages to retain the traditional *sha’bi* and religious (that opposes religious extremism or terrorism) values, works tirelessly and ethically, and expresses utmost respect towards foreign quality education. His authenticity also comes to the fore in his love and non-abusive treatment towards his wife.

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247 The eight local Egyptian channels are fully controlled by the state and operate under the authority of the Ministry of Information. Private channels like Dream TV, el-Mehwar TV and OTV that broadcast from Egypt enjoy relatively more freedom on what they air. Their operations are, however, authorized by the government and their Egyptian millionaire owners such as Ahmed Bahgat and Naguib Sawiris have numerous business interests with the state.
Certainly, issues related to women rights have become focal issues in the Egyptian television particularly during the holy month. In 2007 Ramadan series such as *Yetrabba Fi `Ezzo* (Raised in his Prosperity) discussed the concept of equal rights to quality education and its value in the Arab world, and, *Qadeyat Ra`i `Am* (A Case of Public Opinion), tackled violent rape and sexual abuse against women. Lack of education and violence against women were presented as some of the main issues threaten Egyptian women’s well-being and hinder the country’s development.

To understand why focus is directed specifically at women, it is vital to make some historical references. Mitchell (1988: 113) demonstrates that during the occupation of Egypt, colonist powers demarcated women as both a ‘locus of the country’s backwardness’ and a focal sphere for change towards enlightened rationality. Since then, Egypt’s development has become evaluated in relation to the progress of its women population. With the onset of a modernizing discourse of the Egyptian nation-state, emphasis has shifted towards women’s education in particular. In the Egyptian context, women carry the biggest responsibility for the ‘rational upbringing’ of future generations (Shakry, 1998: 126) and, accordingly, they are entitled to quality education.

More recently, on the Egyptian television the ‘ideal’ Muslim professional is presented as the image of the effective business person. He/she is the one who has mastered strategic management and other global competitive skills, while retaining the values of Islam and local traditions. The Muslim professional is depicted as someone who dresses in suits, works efficiently and has high moral standards.

This image is also portrayed in one of Sami Yusuf’s most popular and frequently aired songs in Ramadan named *Hasbi Rabbi* (My Lord is enough for me). The singer is presented as a successful business professional with high ethical standards and Muslim values. He is also shown as someone who manages to accommodate different cultural repertoires in his personal life. In some of the song’s clips, he is seen as praying, mingling tolerantly with people from all over the world and, also, dressed as a professional. In one scene Yusuf is wearing a suit and riding a London bus and gives up his seat to an elderly English lady. In another he wears a *gallabiyya* as he teaches young

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248 The song is present in Sami Yusuf’s second Album ‘My Umma’. For more information on the singer, visit http://www.samiyusuf.com/
Muslim children verses from the Koran, while yet in another, he is dressed in a suit and gives a presentation to an international audience. Part of this modernist image proposes that an ideal Muslim living in today’s globalized world must express benevolence and tolerance towards all fellow man, regardless of religious affiliation. It also suggests that one can accentuate different selves in various social contexts.

To propagate further the notion of religious tolerance, the media continuously stresses on the unity of Egyptian Muslims and Copts in respecting each other’s religious celebrations and standing together for the common good of the nation as a whole. This is depicted in recent Egyptian Ramadan soap operas whereby Coptic characters play the leading roles such as in Awan al-Ward (The flowers season) and Khayal al-zill (Shadow-play). Indeed, so pronounced is the ‘national unity’ theme in Awan al-Ward that it has included scenes of Muslims and Copts praying side by side in mosques and churches.

The government also makes use of high viewership in Ramadan by initiating social and economic campaigns. In Ramadan 2009, the Ministry of Tourism launched a national television campaign known as the ‘National Tourism Awareness Project’, based on several chains of scenes to encourage locals not to over-price or cheat tourists. The scenes of the campaign where shot at some of Egypt’s most prominent touristic sites, such as Al-Husayn area, with the slogan ‘Tourism Benefits Everyone’. The commercial addressed the audience in a generic way, reminding all Egyptians that tourism is a major source of income for nearly everyone and, consequently, of utmost importance to the nation’s overall economic development.

Another campaign that was launched by the Ministry of Trade and Industry and put together by the Industrial Training Council (ITC) in Ramadan, dealt with the increasing unemployment crises in Egypt. Using the ubiquitous image of the unemployed man sitting around all day in the ahwa, the campaign set out to point the finger at a large portion of the nation’s population who are both unemployed and doing little to find work. The advertisements even promoted a toll-free number that the unemployed could call,

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249 This is five-year project based on three-part media campaign and launched in 2006. The first phase focuses on how many jobs tourism creates and how it factors into our daily lives. Stage two of the media campaign will attempt to change people’s interactions with tourists. The final stage uses celebrity endorsements to reinforce the message.

250 At the time, the incident of the kidnapping of eleven European tourists and eight Egyptians while making an off-road tour of southern Egypt in September 2008 had a negative impact on the tourism industry in the country.
putting them through to specialists who could quickly help the candidates find factory work. The social advertisement further warned that if one continues to sit idle without actively looking for a job, he will end up becoming a thief or a criminal. In contrast, the advertisement showed a determined person who tirelessly job hunts until he lands a junior job, and eventually, rises to a senior position.

To conclude, the deteriorating economy the country faces is pushing the government to work closely with the media to raise awareness that teamwork, efficiency, and ethical practices are crucial for development. The authentic Egyptian citizen is portrayed as hard-working, committed to local traditions and religious values.

2.3 Preachers

In contemporary Egypt, the kind of religion largely communicated to the youth is not so much about rituals and theological doctrine. Instead, the new da`wa endorsed by the government supports the nation’s modernist project where emphasis is placed on creating responsible, efficient and proactive Muslim citizens. I wish to emphasize that the state has a great authority on which preachers are allowed to hold speeches at local mosques and Egyptian-based broadcast channels. Those that defy the government’s development initiatives are either discredited or prevented from preaching. Principally in Ramadan, Muslims strive to reach elevated states of piety and, accordingly, dedicate much of their leisure time to listening to religious preachers. Religious preachers are thus chief figures to communicate what is ‘authentic’ Islam and how to realize it.

In my interviews with young upper-middle class women, it became apparent that the so-called ‘inspirational speeches and ideas’ of the auto didactic preacher Amr Khaled greatly motivated their participation in volunteerism, internships, learning foreign languages and taking computer skills courses. Khaled’s preaches the idea that Islam is about changing and improving yourself and your community, and his da’wa is generally a call to actively engage in social development. In his television programs, Amr Khaled frequently calls for young people to engage in their community: ‘Guys, don’t wait for

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251 The Ministry of Religious Endowments in Egypt is responsible for licensing mosques and authorizing preachers.
something to happen. Let’s do it ourselves!’ One of his first projects was the collection and distribution of second-hand clothes in poor areas. Thousands of young people participated, and in the subsequent months, volunteer work among young people increased. Amr Khaled is also known among the Egyptian public for expressing mass support towards Risala social organization’s sustainable development projects. Khaled’s call for participation in society is articulated as a moral obligation which Amr Khaled continuously stresses in his religious programs: A good Muslim is a proactive Muslim who, within Islamic guidelines, contributes to his community and nation’s progress.

In one incident, a young woman provided me with one of Amr Khaled’s articles that she expressed great fascination towards. The article was published in al-Dustur newspaper (17 September 2008) as a Ramadan supplement. It was titled ‘Amr Khaled in stories of the Koran: Do you feel the pleasures of being close to God’ and was based on some reflections provided by Khaled. He recommended Arab youth to be proactive, to improve themselves through attaining competitive skills such as languages. ‘Move! Move! Know that the difference between the proactive and passive person is the same difference between the chair and yourself, and the same difference between….the living organism and inanimate objects’ (Khaled, 2008: 23). He further recommends youth not to blame negative economic circumstances for their misfortunes such as lack of employment opportunities. Rather, by making reference to some verses and stories from the Koran, he states that a ‘good’ Muslim is the one who is persistent and actively searches for ethical means to improve his economic and social position.

This rationalistic approach to religion and charity work matches the young upper-middle class women informants’ perspective as well. They express community work, efficiency, rational thinking as important traits for an ‘authentic’ Muslim. They defined their religion as a rational one that encourages them to be proactive, progressive, well-educated, healthy and responsible individuals. A common example provided by informants is that God opened His revelation with the words ‘Read’ to encourage humans to seek knowledge rather than sit idle.252 However, as we shall come to see in the next section, authenticity for upper-middle class youth is not only perceived in a rationalistic sense but also celebrated for its aesthetic qualities.

252 Surat Al-Alaq 96:1-5.
3. The Aesthetization of ‘Pure’ non-Western Traditions

Regardless of social position, many Egyptian informants express strong desires to return to their ‘pure’ traditional roots detached from Western culture domination. The desire for a shared discourse on authenticity, which emphasizes this idea is based on the genealogy of the notion of cultural invasion.253 Past colonization of Arab countries in particular inform contemporary Muslims’ feeling of nostalgia for the authentic or ‘pure’ and, in relation, discontent towards the West (Roy, 2004). Imperial expansion and domination in the Arab region caused many local citizens to feel humiliated by the military superiority of their (Western) enemies, and by the incompetence and corruption of their own authoritarian regimes. Against this background, nationalism in the Arab world took the form of identity exclusivity, detached from cosmopolitanism or the freedom to choose between aspects of different cultures (Meijer, 1999).254 United States and Europe’s support of Israeli occupation further enhanced people’s resentment towards the West. The general sentiment among Egyptian Muslims that their religion is under threat or disrespected by the West motivates them further to define their identity in opposition to Westernization.255

253 This discourse of modern authenticity can be attributed to Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) whose writings explored and initiated all the directions that seekers have since taken in search for the ideal of the authentic. According to Rousseau (1974), human evolution went from primitive purity to modern corruption, much as innocent children become deteriorated grown-ups. Degradation occurred because of the growth of civilization, capitalism (division of labor and resulting differences in wealth and property) and modernity that led to negative human traits like greed, ambition, theft etc. Civilizations have transformed the human race into slaves, striving for power, and imitators of fashion. Due to such disillusionment with modernity and capitalism, many individuals develop a longing for the pristine and pure.

254 Meijer (1999) explains that it is important to make reference to some historical events to understand why cosmopolitanism has become problematic today in the Arab world. During the Ottoman Empire, the Middle East was open to various religious and ethnic groups, where they freely interacted and shared ideas and lifestyles together. Cities like Alexandria and Beirut were centers for free culture exchange. However, European domination, arrogance, imperialist endeavors and racism in the 19th century, greatly minimized the region’s openness and toleration towards other cultures (Meijer, 1999). Moreover the ruling elite class of bureaucrats, landowners and business people, further undermined cosmopolitanism in the region. These elite sects represented social injustice and were perceived by the masses as passive since they did not take a part in the nations’ struggle against Western domination. As a result Arabs came to define their own identity in opposition to the Western lifestyle. The Egyptian revolution that overthrew the monarchy (Turkish decent) and Nationalist and Islamist before that (1930s and 1940s) all rejected Western culture as foreign, imported and re-affirmed the superiority of the Middle Eastern culture over Western ones.

255 As I argued earlier in previous chapters, various incidents have ignited Muslims’ resentment towards the West. These events mainly include: Pope Benedict XVI, who delivered a lecture in where he used an
Presentday Egyptian Muslims have thus a strong nostalgia for the golden ages of Islam, such as the Andalusia period or the Ottoman Empire. These Islamic dynasties evoked creativity, originality, scientific renovations and cultural advancements. They also laid the cornerstones of the European Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and modern Western society (Morgan, 2007). Egyptians nowadays champion these golden eras for, what they perceive, their more successful achievements of a moral order of life compared to contemporary times. In addition, they yearn for those past eras when Muslim civilizations dominated the world for centuries (militarily, scientifically and culturally) and were the envy of all nations. That longing for the ‘glorious Islamic past’ becomes most manifest during the holy month. For Egyptian Muslims, Ramadan stands as the time to embrace ‘true’ Islamic values, and also, ‘original’ or ‘creative’ Egyptian/Arab traditions detached from Western culture influence. This nostalgic desire is partially fulfilled through the consumption of what is perceived as pure forms of Egyptian and Arab culture.

To satisfy consumers’ desire for what is thought as authentic, service providers and marketers offer diverse replicas of traditional-historical products and popular art. In the process, various traditional icons have become folklorized commodities where only the aesthetic qualities are highlighted. In its contemporary Arabic usage, the term folklore refers to popular (sha`bi) culture insofar as it can be constructed as artistic or civilizational heritage: various genres of popular music, colloquial epics, poetry, proverbs, puppet theatre plays, and rural arts and crafts are now labeled sha`bi (Schielke, 2006: 174). Recontextualised and redefined, such artifacts and customs are reproduced in books, films, theatre plays and public events. In the process, they are strictly presented in a positive light as exotic, original and creative. In the words of Dr. Abd al-Hamid Yunis, a prominent Egyptian folklorist:

The first rule by which the folklorist is obliged to work is to sift the folk heritage so as to selects samples characterized by authenticity (asala), refinement (raqi) and the potential for inspiration (ilham) and which are among the aspects of cultural history or the reflections of artistic and literary expression (Armbrust 2006: 38)

analogy to link Islam to violence and criticized the Prophet Muhammed; the satirical cartoons of Prophet Muhammed published in a Danish newspaper; and the stabbing of an innocent veiled Egyptian women in a German court by a radical European person in 2009.
Through this practice of folkloric representation, traditional icons and art forms are remodeled and transformed into tradable commodities. They thus meet consumers’ desires for the aesthetic authentic and contribute profits to its commercial producers.

The Egyptian state endorses the aesthetication of traditional culture forms since it is profitable to the tourist industry. Income earned from tourism presently represents about 25% of Egypt's total foreign currency income. To support the country's economic progress, the government has utilized various strategies to help commodify traditions to fulfill tourists and affluent Egyptians’ yearn for the oriental and exotic Egyptian culture as I will present later in the chapter.256

The government’s support for the aesthetication or folklorization of traditions also supports its modernist project, described earlier. The aesthetication process cleanses local traditions from those attributes that are perceived to counter the imagery of a progressive nation, such as idleness, ignorance and superstition. These ‘negative’ traditions become dissociated from the fields of orthodox religion and modern culture practices. They are instead labeled as cultural icons or folklore associated with historical practices, whereby only positive artistic characteristics are represented. When traditional forms are framed in positive terms as creative or exotic folklore while negative connotations are deemphasized, the imagery of a progressive nation is retained (Schielke, 2006).

In the next section, I will present those authentic commodities that the young affluent classes indulge in during Ramadan. In promoting these commodities, only aesthetic attributes are emphasized such as originality and creativity. In addition, they are presented as ‘pristine’ Egyptian/Arab/Muslim culture forms, ‘untouched’ by Western culture.

4. Consumption of Traditions in Ramadan

It has become commonplace for social scientists to ‘expose’ claims of authenticity on the basis of assembling and re-assembling elements from whatever the consumer market and

256 Various authors have examined how the Egyptian government has commodified cultural heritage sites (c.f. Kuppinger, 2006) and popular culture forms like the mawlids (observance of the Prophet’s birthday) festivals (cf. Schielke, 2006).
culture industry has to offer as mere constructs. Although I agree that any claim to cultural essence implies a construction, the focus of my argument in this section lies elsewhere. Following Lindholm (2002; 2008) who distinguishes between the genealogical or historical mode and the identity or correspondence mode for characterizing specific entities as authentic, I mainly focus on how and why commodities and activities are experienced by upper middle class young women as pointing to what is cherished as authentic in a certain setting. Taking what Lindholm calls the ‘quest for a felt authentic grounding’ as a starting point for analysis, I am interested in the various techniques and resources that people have at their disposal to believe in what for them are undeniable facts and values (cf. Van de Port 2004). I will argue that for those who are thoroughly embedded in modern life styles, consumerism is a likely option to experience authenticity.

During Ramadan, one can observe a general longing for the pristine and pure past detached from Western culture discourses. Upper-middle class female youth develop a desire for consuming traditional and popular commodities, art forms and activities. In Ramadan they prefer to adopt distinctive visible dress-styles and behavior patterns that express their affiliation to the Arab Muslim umma. In this section, I will present how the demand for traditional products and art-forms that are normally largely associated with economically marginalized groups increases substantially among these affluent upper-middle class young women in the fasting month. Those traditional products originally consumed by the lower-classes are, however, re-fashioned in a stylish manner. They are made of high quality materials to match modern tastes. Thus these hybrid commodities become part of the cosmopolitan high-culture; blending traditional tastes with contemporary ones to create an appealing sense of authenticity.

Contrary to perspective that the path to authenticity seeks exclusivity detached from cosmopolitanism as claimed by Meijer (1999) and the participants themselves, the actual realization of authenticity is comfortably framed within cosmopolitanism. In their patterns of consumption, the upper-middle classes imitate or flirt with habits of the rural
poor in ways that allow both identification with and distinction from lower class citizens who tend to be perceived as ‘authentic’ albeit ‘ignorant’ and ‘uncivilized’ Egyptians.  

4.1 Cuisine

Food occupies a dominant place in Ramadan. This is manifested in consumption and sociability patterns within most private and public leisure settings. Almost all informants stated that they preferred to break their fast and eat sahur meal with traditional meals and drinks. Just about all restaurants and fast-food outlets prepare special Ramadan meals and desserts to accommodate the high demand for the traditional during the holy month.

In Ramadan, when one is invited over to friends or relatives house, it is common to bring along one of the famous Ramadan desserts like basbusa, qatayef, konafa as a gift. I spoke to a number of salespeople who work at confectionary stores. They assured me that sale of the traditional desserts peaks during the holy month, while the

Image 15: Alain Le notre bakery and confectionary outlets offers traditional Ramadan sweets, with delivery services.

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257 C.f. Abu-Lughod (2005) and Sonneveld (2009) who note that in the Egyptian media the rural poor are presented as authentic, in terms of preserving cultural values, and yet remain ignorant and uneducated.
258 Abdel Aziz (1987) states that the konafa and qatayef desserts originated in the Sham region (Lebanon, Palestine, Syria etc.) during the reign of Mu`awiya ibn Abi Sufyan. He was the waly or ruler of the Sham region during the Caliphate of `Uthman ibn `Affan. He was a great fan of the konafa and he used to eat it during sahur to keep his energy level high during fasting. Since Mu`awiya was known for being fond of food and found it sometimes hard to fast during Ramadan, his doctor recommended the konafa for him (ibid). It has also been known that the konafa has been made for Caliph Sulayman ibn `Abd al-Malik. As for the qatayef, Abdel Aziz (1987) notes that if can be traced back to the Mamluks and Turkish dynasty. To support his argument, the author states that there is a large collection of poetry during these eras where both the konafa and qatayef were mentioned.
demand for foreign sweets declines. Below I quote from a discussion I had with a sales
manager who works at one of the many outlets of one of Egypt’s largest pastry chain, La
Poire:

La Poire Employee: In Ramadan we hire extra staff members to accommodate for the large demand on
konafah, atayef, basbosah, balah el-sham. We also take early orders to avoid having a large crowd of
customers right before iftar time. Sometimes the crowd gets so large that fights break out. Ramadan is the
toughest month for us...we also now have home-delivery service.
Researcher: Why do you think demand increases during the holy month in particular
La Poire Employee: With people fasting all day they lose a lot of energy and nutrients. There is nothing better
than sweets to bring back their energy so that they are ready for after-iftar fun! (laughs)
Researcher: So why especially the demand for these kinds of sweets you named increases
La Poire Employee: Ma’am. Ramadan is not only the month for religion but asala (authenticity, ns). How can
one celebrate asala by eating English muffins, cheesecakes and tiramisu?
Researcher: Why not?
La Poire Employee: Because simply these are khawagati (foreign, ns) stuff.

What is of interest here is how the La Poire manager extends the idea that the authentic
is detached from the West to the notion that commonly demanded foreign sweets must be
replaced by local traditional ones in Ramadan.

What I found striking is that almost all prestigious restaurants in Cairo, usually
located within 5-star hotels, include typical Egyptian popular-street food like ful,
ta’miyya, koshari and the rough Egyptian bread, called ’aish baladi in their Ramadan
menus. At all the elitist restaurants which cater for the rich, the prices of these popular
food items are very expensive in comparison to their usual market price. This can
partially be explained by the fact that they are made with high quality ingredients, which
are sometimes imported from abroad.

People’s taste for the authentic during Ramadan stands in sharp contrast with their
food habits during other times of the year. The Egyptian middle and lower classes
struggle ruthlessly to overcome the difficult economic conditions and fulfill their
ambitions to upgrade their standards of living and to imitate the consumption model of
the upper classes. Simultaneously, the upper classes generally favor to distance
themselves from popular food tastes and prefer the refined and distinctive tastes such as
caviar, sushi and other foreign types of food. Bourdieu (1979) defines ‘taste of luxury’ as
reflective of the tastes of individuals who possess enough capital to enjoy expensive food items; while popular food is defined as ‘taste of necessity’, which is usually cheap and nourishing to ensure the reproduction of labor activities at the lowest possible cost. Yet, in Ramadan, there is a preference shift that can be observed in food habits. Traditional dishes transcend the connotation with the ‘tastes of necessity’ and come to represent a taste of the authentic which everyone regardless of social class yearns for. Popular food is transformed into ‘tastes of luxury’ when located and sold at high expense restaurants or hotels.

The number of television cook-shows and cook books presenting traditional Egyptian food rises tremendously during Ramadan. Upper-middle class female informants affirmed that part of their early Ramadan shopping consists of downloading food recipes from the internet or buying cookbooks that explain how to prepare popular traditional dishes. Some of their favorite sources were www.wasfahsahla.com (easy recipes) and Magda El-Mehdawi’s book Matbakh giddati:Akalat masriyya, hilw wa-hadiq (My Grandmother’s Kitchen: Egyptian Food, Sweet and Sour). El-Mehdawi’s book is a collection of recipes of what the author defines ‘as traditionally known and defined’ Egyptian cuisine that she learned from elder women and old cookbooks (Rouchdy, 2004: 130). In her own recipes, she has adapted the traditional recipes to match modern standards of hygiene and health.

Healthy eating habits are in fact main concerns for the young affluent women informants. Even though they preferred to consume more authentic kinds of food in Ramadan, such as the famous molokhyya and traditional sweet pastries, they complained that the Egyptian cuisine is unhealthy in terms of having high calorie content.\(^\text{259}\) Conscious of their body weight, they prefer traditional meals that are cooked with healthy and low-fat ingredients. These modern food preferences coincide with other new healthy cooking trends practiced in the West, such as slow-cooking. This growing demand has in turn triggered the introduction of slow-cooking recipes, cookbooks and cookers.

\(^{259}\) Molokhyya is a fibre plant and also known as tossa jute (corchorus olitorius) and it is of the tiliaceae family. It is made up of glutinous quality of leaves commonly made to produce a kind of soup, eaten with bread or rice in Egypt. It is believed that the ancient Egyptian plant named shemshemet may possibly be identified with molokhyya. For an interesting read on Egyptian food and drinks that originated during Pharaonic times, read Wilson (1988).
Upper-classes’ concern for maintaining a healthy diet, has also prompted new food services in Egypt. In recent years, various sweet pastry chains in Cairo have started to provide low-fat traditional sweet pastries. La Poire, Les Dames and other confectionary outlets provide low-fat and low-sugar sweets in Ramadan. In addition, many women who struggle with time-constraints, prefer recipes that are easy and do not take much time to prepare. For the same reason the phenomenon of food delivery has increased considerably in the last few years and extends to Ramadan as well (See image 15).

In contrast, a nostalgic tone dominates members of the older generations in reflecting on contemporary Ramadan cuisine. Many express yearn for the long forgotten ‘flavorsome’ dishes prepared in the past. They argued that food nowadays is made with artificial flavors and colors, synthetic products and low-fat ingredients that make food seem ‘tasteless’ and ‘unoriginal’. They are nostalgic about the old days when females spent long hours cooking and preparing ‘natural’ Ramadan meals made with pure fatty and fresh ingredients. Some older generations commented that the Ramadan sweets have become ‘standardized’ since women no long bake and innovate with their own sweet dishes. One 63-year old male participant told me how he misses his grandmother’s Ramadan dishes that had her own ‘signature’ or trademark taste, decoration and serving.

Certainly the emergence of a mass society and people’s increasingly rushed lifestyles has resulted in the deterioration of domestic cooking.\textsuperscript{260} Commercial food companies and confectionary stores have enormously grown in Cairo in the past decade. The explosion of Cairo’s population, including those with high purchasing power, and women’s increased employment had serious percussions on domestic cooking and Ramadan traditional dishes. Simultaneously, it served as a market opportunity for commercial companies that mass produce a wide array of traditional food items.

To sum up, upper-middle class young women consume restyled forms of traditional meals and desserts that match their modern lifestyles. In the process, the highly demanded popular food commonly associated with the poor, become part of the high culture.

\textsuperscript{260} Mass society is defined as the absolute size of the population as well as its effective size. This phenomenon has exploded in Egypt in approximately the past fifty years (Amin, 2003).
4.2 Dress-Style

One kind of Ramadan related code-switching that was described in previous chapters is dress-style. With the arrival of Ramadan, many girls give up their Western fashion clothing and adopt more local dress-style, principally the *gallabiyya*, a loose flowing gown usually associated with the urban popular classes and the peasants. In Ramadan, the *gallabiyya* becomes a celebrated national dress which features as an important expression of local identity and social distinction. While the *gallabiyya* has become a focal fashion icon in Ramadan, during other times of the year it is generally perceived as a sign of ignorance and backwardness.

The *gallabiyya* has come to signify contradicting values in the Egyptian context. Abaza (2007) explains that the discrimination against the *gallabiyya* is mainly attributed to late President Nasser’s modernization approach in the 1950s, which aimed in elevating and enlarging a culture of middle-class employees, opposed to peasant culture. Since Nasser’s era, the *gallabiyya* worn by the peasant were depicted by Egyptian films and TV dramas as a sign of backwardness. In later years, the garments have also come to stand for the basic and unspoiled Egyptian way of life (cf. Abaza, 2007; Abu-Lughod, 2005; Sonneveld, 2009).

Upper class female youth informants are generally highly interested in imported Western fashion. Consumption of expensive, rare and branded dress commodities gives them a feeling of differentiation and social uniqueness

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261 Egyptians generally failed to preserved or create a national dress, like the Indians, Malay and Indonesians. Historical studies show that the adoption of Western clothing by Egyptians pertained less interactive complications that these other countries encountered. For more on this issue, see Abaza (2007).
which Abaza (2007) affirms has always been the practice for upper class Egyptians. This idea of social distinction supports what Georg Simmel (1904) argues that imported fashion has high value as they are rare, high in expense, brought from abroad and thus act as status markers which in turn differentiate its wearers from everyone else.

The type of outfits that the upper-classes wear sets the fashion in the country, whereby the lower-classes strive to imitate these styles. This explains the existence and success of many Egyptian companies that sell Western-style clothing for more affordable lower prices than the original ones imported from the West. This notion of imitation, again, supports Simmel’s (1904) argument that fashion becomes a game of replication or rather ‘charming imitation’ that fulfills the role of social adaption.

In Ramadan, however, new standards of fashion are introduced and aspired to by the upper-classes. They seek to not only wear more conservative clothing, as was discussed in previous chapters, but also opt for more traditional-type of clothing namely the *gallabiyya*. The *gallabiyya* takes on a different position in Ramadan than any other times of the year. During Ramadan, it is perceived as honoring the authenticity of Egyptian tastes and aesthetics against Western cultural imperialism. The *gallabiyya* becomes an essential part of celebrating Egypt’s cultural uniqueness. Upper-middle class informants expressed feeling of pride to wear the *gallabiyya* when receiving guests for *iftar* and *sahur* meals.

As noted in chapter four, the *sahur gallabiyya* party has frequently been associated with Halloween (See image 16). One informant stated that in Halloween the theme is thriller, in Ramadan it is authenticity or *asala*. Interestingly, this respondent like many young upper-class Egyptian women reflects on her Ramadan experiences through the prism or spectacle of globalization. Their high exposure to cultural patterns from all over the world has influenced the way they perceive and practice their own culture traditions.

The types of *gallabiyya* worn by the upper-middle class female informants are of high quality and trendy looking. Many of the informants prefer to purchase colorful and heavily beaded *gallabiyya* that outline the body-shape and, hence, look more attractive. These upgraded types of *gallabiyya* highly contrast with the common cheap, plain-
colored, loose and poorly-made *gallabiyya* worn by Egyptian peasants and the lower-classes.

While Western clothing is usually looked up to as a sign of modernity, progress and social distinction, this changes in the fasting month. In Ramadan restyled *gallabiyya* have come to symbolize a celebration of national identity. Thus, through commercialized dress codes, religious identity and national identity merge. In part mocking the backwardness of lower class citizens, the stylish, high quality *gallabiyyas* model the affluent as hybrid beings; they are modern, religious and Egyptian all at the same time. The simultaneous expression of identification and differentiation allows an authentication of the self.

4.3 *Fanus*

The famous Ramadan lantern today comes in various shapes and models to appeal to the diverse Muslim markets in Egypt. Not only has it become common to see the lantern produced in trendy colors and designs, but also many are produced in non-Muslim countries. Foreign imports have invaded the local market in Egypt and managed to intervene and produce Egyptian authentic crafts. Many Egyptians fear that their national heritage icon, the Ramadan *fanus*, will eventually lose its authentic character with foreign economic intervention.

The Chinese have modified the traditional brass *fanus* with a candle, replacing it for plastic ones with an electric lamp. Unlike the traditional ones that were muted, the new *fanus* sings not only traditional Ramadan melodies, but also modern Arabic pop songs. Some people prefer the Chinese *fanus* over the local one because of its ‘trendy-modern’ look and multiple functions. One vendor selling Ramadan lanterns went as far as to say ‘the traditional *fanus*….may it rest in peace’ when describing how the increased demand for the modern *fanus* during the last five years threatens to displace the traditional ones.

To preserve the Egyptian heritage and support the local economy, some people (regardless of social position) find it unethical to purchase Chinese-produced *fanus*. Some of the young affluent respondents stated that an item can only be authentic if
produced in its home country and made by the hands of the people from that country. For these individuals, seeing the label ‘made in China’ on a fanus, undermines its value. Some upper-middle class informants added that since the Egyptian economy is breaking down with the influx of imports and lack of local production, it is their duty as Egyptians to purchase local products. One lower-class informant even went as far as stating that those Chinese-made fanus are haram or prohibited since they are produced by non-Muslims.

What I particularly wish to highlight is some young upper-middle classes’ criticisms over imported fawanis. Informants from this social category often claimed that ‘true’ authenticity is not merely based on consuming traditional commodities, but also in making responsible choices. For many, this implies purchasing domestic-produced commodities that support their country’s economic progress. A few others reported that consuming in a responsible manner encompasses issues related to fair-trade and other ethical considerations such as child-labor and pollution. This proves that modern considerations related to ethical production greatly influences the affluent educated classes’ consumption choices, including those that are considered as authentic. Finally it is vital to note that while many young affluent women reported the ideal of purchasing locally-made commodities, I observed that informants from that same social class were in fact high consumers of imported commodities. This trend includes actual consumption of the imported stylish Chinese-made fawanis. This shows that authenticity is deeply enmeshed in ambivalences.

4.4 Ahwa baladi

The Egyptian expression ‘sitting in an ahwa’ is synonymous with having nothing to do and wasting one’s time. Upper class Egyptians usually shun away from the traditional ahwa, which they correlate to non-modern and negative attributes such as inefficiency, unemployment, unhealthy shisha-smoking and, generally, wasteful pastime leisure. In Ramadan, however, the ahwa takes on a different symbolic form and comes to stand for an authentic, more relaxed way of life rather than what one is accustomed to in presentday hectic life in Cairo. In Ramadan, many prefer to spend their time in the old
fashioned atmosphere of ahawi baladi instead of those Western-style ones I described in chapter three. During the holy month some of these up-market Western cafes, even, take on the appearance of the traditional ahwa found in sha’bi or working-class areas in Cairo. They are redecorated to resemble the local ahwa and offer shisha, tawla, traditional meals and drinks. Other traditional cafes that are highly frequented by upper-middle class Egyptians during the holy month are those available at al-Husayn area in Old Cairo. Although, these highly demanded traditional-looking ahwas look similar to those found in poor districts of Cairo, they greatly differ in price and quality. For example a cleanly washed cup of tea boiled with mineral water at the ahwa in al-Husayn area during Ramadan can reach up to LE 10 (€1.2) while those in sha’bi areas cost approximately LE 0.50 (€0.07). Also, particularly during the Ramadan weekends some of these look-alike ahawi baladi impose a minimum entrance charge that may reach up to LE 100 (€12).

Moreover, some of the products offered at those traditional-looking ahawi are factory-manufactured canned soft drinks, such as the earlier mentioned Mirinda karkade, packaged juices and snacks packed in sealed packets. By modifying their menus to fit with modern preferences for hygiene and conveniences, these cafes have become quite popular among Egyptian youth in Ramadan.

4.5 Popular art forms

During Ramadan various cultural centers increase the production of popular cultural and classic performances such as the folklore shows of the tannura, zikr, zar and local ethnic dances. In response to the high demand of these popular art forms in Ramadan, the Egyptian Ministry of Culture (Intellectual Development Division) and various other cultural centers in downtown Cairo organize daily performances. The Ministry and other culture centers, like Sakiat El Sawy Culture Wheel, post the performances schedule on

262 Tannura is a dance usually referred to as the whirling dervishes dance, though technically it is not. The tannura is a large costume that looks like a skirt that the dancers wear around their waist. The dancers then whirl in circles. Zikrs are performances consisting mainly of the religious exercises of the dervishes. Sometimes standing in the form of a circular or an oblong ring, or in the two rows facing each other or sitting down they chant, La ilaha illa-llah (There is no deity but God), or Allah!Allah!Allah! (God! God! God!) or repeat other invocation over and over again until their energy is almost exhausted complementing their chants with a motion of the head, body and arms. The zar is a practice performed to exorcise jinns or evil spirits.
their official websites. Also, at five star hotels in Cairo, various cultural performances are organized within their premises.

In Egypt as elsewhere, popular culture contrasts with a more exclusive, even elitist ‘high culture’, that is the culture of ruling social groups (Armbrust, 1996). Many popular leisure forms are perceived by the elites as ‘low’, ‘vulgar’ and lacking sophistication. Particularly performances of the zar that are believed to exorcise evil spirits are commonly ridiculed by the upper-classes as superstitious acts of the ignorant. For the lower classes, however, popular culture represents the true Egyptian Islamic heritage, ‘uncorrupted’ by Western influence and misunderstood by the affluent ‘Westernized’ Egyptians.

In Ramadan, popular culture forms do not only become popular among the well-to-do, they also become symbols for national identity. Again, negative traits associated with low-culture forms are removed and focus is directed on the glory of the past and on aesthetic values that may be evoked by them. Similar to observations made by Werner (1997) and Stauth (1984), popular culture is increasingly marketed by Egyptian culture centers as exotic, real and with unique local color to both the tourists and upper-classes. In this process, a collection of stereotypes about the lifestyles of the rural Egyptians become commodities for the rich to experience.

In the view of many lower-middle class members, the commodification of popular culture has undermined the authenticity and purity of the arts. That social group’s main criticism lies in the ‘objectification’ of popular practices that are put on stage for outside passive spectators who pay much more for the staged spectacle than semi-participants do during a performance. In addition, various popular performances are believed to have a religious function, such as zikr, which is believed to be undermined when passive spectators are involved.

After attending a zikr performance at a popular cultural center in Al-Husayn area I interviewed Somaya, a 66 year old poor woman selling ethnic crafts and jewelry. She expressed utter discontent towards the performance I had just attended:

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263 Egyptian Ministry of Culture posts the schedule of cultural performances during Ramadan on its website: http://www.cdf-eg.org.
Somaya: For me Ramadan is not complete without my involvement in a zikr. I enjoy the beautiful voices of the dervishes enchanting the name of Allah. It also helps me release stress and renew myself.

Researcher: How has that changed?

Somaya: Today the youngsters release stress by going out dancing, taking drugs and indecent behavior! They know nothing about their culture or religion. Try asking one of these kids what is zikr and they will not even know. We no longer have zikr in Cairo.

Researcher: But I have attended a zikr performance at el-Hawary Culture center the other day.

Somaya: (laughing) My dear child. This is not zikr….it is an esta’rad (performance or show) for people like you…afangi (Westernized) Egyptians and the tourists to see.

Researcher: What is wrong with it?

Somaya: Its purpose is to make profits. Money should not be the focus for any zikr. The dervishes do it for Allah and not to make money (they only receive some donations, ns). In the real zikr, the traditional musical equipment is used….like the nay (kind of flute, ns), arghul (double reed-pipe, ns), baz (little drum, ns) etc. The stuff you saw was probably done by non-religious so-called dervishes, who are in it for the money they collect from the rich Egyptians and the tourists. The musical instruments are not even the real ones. Also how long did this performance you saw take? An hour? A real zikr takes hours and hours.

One can conclude several things from my discussion with Somaya. First it reveals how the dynamics of globalization and consumer culture interact with traditional rituals like the zikr to transform it into a commodity with monetary value. As Somaya mentioned, for one to experience a zikr in modern times one has to pay an entrance ticket to the theater. Another thing she brought up is that the affluent Egyptians and tourists who desire an authentic experience in Ramadan, tend to witness a customized version for a zikr session to match their rushed lifestyles and modern tastes. The new version is shorter and highly modified in terms of musical content in comparison to what Somaya perceives as the old original form. In addition, Somaya perceived the zikr as a religious ceremony and that therefore she scorns the performances I attended which she implies are carried out by non-religious so-called dervishes.

This common trend where popular art forms become 'pseudo events' that are presented to satisfy tourists' needs for new simulated experiences is commonly referred to as ‘staged authenticity’ (Goulding, 2000). While, nostalgia makes reference to the past, it is clearly a product of the present as Sandikei and Omeraki (2007) emphasize. Contemporary leisure places where authenticity is claimed are evidently modified and tailored to satisfy the target markets’ up-to-date tastes and preferences for hygiene and
safety. As will be discussed in the next section, heritage areas may also be transformed into replica sites that stage authenticity to fulfill modern consumers’ taste for the aesthetic pure and real.

4.6 Historical leisure arenas commodified

The search for ‘pure’ or ‘genuine’ experiences in Ramadan not only stimulates the commercial production of restyled traditional commodities and art forms but also the re-modeling or creation of leisure places to cater this quest for the authentic. In Egypt, these include cultural heritage sites and modern replicas of historical leisure venues.

In particular al-Husayn area resonates in Ramadan the trend of what Barthel (1996) calls the ‘commodification of history’ by offering various facilities that specialize in selling commodities or services related to the past. The area encompasses the ancient Khan el-Khalili bazaar, traditional-looking ahwas and restaurants that stage cultural shows. In what follows, I will explore how consumers’ desire for the authentic experience is catered for at this heritage site.

Al-Husayn area offers the opportunity for people to step back in time and experience the illusion of an authentic lifestyle. The modern individuals’ desire for authentic experience is the modern personification of what MacCannell (1992) calls the religious pilgrim, but since in post-modern every-day life the authentic is not widely available, those who seek it must look elsewhere. One way to escape from the anxieties of modern life is the experience of the past, packaged and sold as authentic (Goulding, 2000). Al-Husayn site appears to be the prime place in Ramadan that satisfies people’s sentimental feelings for an authentic past. This is mainly carried out through the exchange of historical or traditional goods and services with a high market price.

The al-Husayn area houses unique ancient mosques, old ahwas and other historical artifacts. But while the buildings and recreation facilities offered may be original, the selective portrayal of events and histories are all too often tailored to match the tastes of the modern visitor. This trend of selective depiction of historical cultural forms has also been observed by Eco (1987) and Fowler (1992). All the monuments and leisure facilities at the area are largely controlled by government authorities. The
Ministry of Culture-Intellectual Development Division decides which artifacts to renovate. It determines the style and duration of the cultural shows, and generally chooses the places and activities that people are permitted to access in the area. Besides, commercial manufacturers and small entrepreneurs choose the range of traditional products available to the consumers at the site. The key point is that both government and commercial companies’ decisions on what and how to display artifacts or products are chiefly driven by profitability interests.

While consumers may, indeed, enjoy an authentic leisure atmosphere in Al-Husayn area, what they actually are forced to consume are what is called ‘pseudo experiences’ (c.f. MacCannell, 1976; Turner and Turner 1978). This viewpoint was particularly raised among the lower-middle classes who view the adapted modern-consumerist leisure versions as polluting true Egyptian Islamic heritage.

The *kheyam Ramadan* are also attempts by its commercial providers to offer the illusion of an authentic and exclusive Ramadan experience in the form of replications of the traditional Bedouin tents. As discussed in chapter four, these leisure venues are made in a manner to recreate the past with imitations of historical frescos. This theming process allows consumers to experience the past through fantasy. The *kheyam Ramadan* seek to re-construct the spirit of the authentic Ramadan experience, an experience that has lost its public appeal during other months of the year.

Nostalgia is always evoked in the context of current modern fears and anxieties such as safety, hygiene and harassment (cf. Panelas, 1979). Accordingly, *kheyam Ramadan* resolve the modern anxieties through imposing high charges on all goods and services provided; placing strict entrance policies, security and bouncers; high standards in food quality and overall cleanliness. The same approach applies to al-Husayn area, where the Egyptian government uses various measures to ensure a safe environment. Armored police vehicles and officers are positioned at all main entrances and intersections in the area to decrease rates of theft, sexual harassment or any other possible threats. These security procedures ensure that people enjoy what they perceive as an authentic experience within controlled safe environments.264

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264 Security has particularly increased recently at al-Husayn area after a terrorist attack occurred there in February 2009. A bomb explosion killed at least four people, including two foreigners.
Another commonality between the commodification process that occurs at al-Husayn and the \textit{kheyam Ramadan} is the intersection between religious places (e.g. mosques) or activities (\textit{sahur} meals), local traditions (e.g. \textit{ahwa baladi} and cultural performances) and the profane (shopping and socializing) at these places. These various components are nearly impossible to separate. Just like theme parks, a ‘dedifferentiation of consumption’ takes place whereby consumption patterns related with different spheres are interconnected (cf. Bryman, 1999:33). These various spheres become inextricably interwoven in experiencing the special Ramadan ambiance.

To conclude, consumption of traditional commodities within a historical context allows people to partially fulfill their nostalgia for what is perceived as the past golden age of Islam as a model of livelihood. However, it would be a misconception to assume that presentday young affluent Egyptians dream of the return of the Ottoman or Fatimid empires. In line with the nation’s modernist project, many play on globalization to achieve what they perceive as the future golden age for economic progress and development of their country. Having noted how the upper-middle classes interpret and live an authentic Ramadan lifestyle, the next section will mainly focus on the lower classes’ conception of authenticity.

5. **Locality, Authenticity and Ambivalences**

During fieldwork in Boulaq, I was occasionally asked ‘\textit{enti aslan men fein}?’ Or ‘where are you originally from?’ The first time I was asked this question I was confused and answered that I am Egyptian. Many people laughed at my answer and one lady explained that they wished to know from which governorate or village my father’s family originated. When I told them Shibin Al-Qanater they cheered saying: these are ‘\textit{ahl el-osul}’

\textit{Image 17: A group of men sitting at the local \textit{ahwa} in Boulaq after breaking fast.}
(meaning in this context: the area of origin is known for its good conduct and values) or ‘agda’ nas’ (meaning, the most chivalrous people). They further added that people from my father’s region were known to be trust-worthy, honest and abided tightly to traditions. Their approval of my father’s family locality of origin greatly facilitated interaction between me and those residing in Boulaq. At other times, the same informants expressed deep fascination for my ability to speak English and study abroad, pitying themselves for not having access to foreign schools or other facilities in their neighborhood.

In this section I present how a person’s place of residency (rural/popular quarters versus urban/affluent areas) is greatly believed by many to shape his/her perceptions and practices of ‘true’ authenticity in Ramadan. Those residing in poor areas are generally believed to hold a tighter grip on what is perceived as pure forms of Egyptian culture. Nevertheless, they are also subject to criticism by state’s authorities and upper-classes for their lack of education, superstitious so-called ‘authentic’ beliefs and, hence, obstructing the nation from progressing. In addition, while the lower-classes criticize the modified types of ‘authentic’ leisure the affluent take part in, they also express desires towards accessing these same commercial resources unavailable to them. I thus argue that the moral universe in which Ramadan authenticity is embedded in is characterized by profound ambivalences, in terms of the coexistence of opposing perspectives.

Life in the country side is often idealized as a ‘pure, authentic’ life that is nonexistent in the city. Members of older generations I interviewed in Boulaq and urban Cairo, assured me that at sha‘bi areas (popular; mainly referred to the poor and commoner section of the city) and rural villages, individuals still retain their ‘asl’ or origin; while those who were born and raised in affluent areas ‘forgot their asl’. While asl is usually associated with blood and kinship (Abu-Lughod 1986), it can also be expressed as a serene identity un-spoilt by the West and modernity (Ghannam, 2002). It is also defined as the process of upbringing or tarbiyya which is closely molded according to the social relationships believed to exist in a particular social setting (Rosen, 1979).

Members of older generations put special attention and value on a person’s place of birth or where he/she was raised up or asl. They defined asl in relationship to

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265 Shibin Al-Qanater is a region that lies in the center of Qalyubia governorate.
residency, in terms of shaping one’s manners and actions. Knowing a person’s *asl* or the place she/he was raised provides information about that person’s ethics and expected behavior in Ramadan. Respondents from older generations (and to some extent those from Boulaq as well, regardless of age) disapproved of those youngsters who were born and raised up in urban-affluent settings. They stated that the juvenile groups ‘failed’ to live up to the ‘true’ Ramadan experience. They explained that unlike themselves and earlier generations, upper-middle class Egyptian youth are corrupted by the ‘modern city life’ where the Western and consumer culture dominates.

It is also vital to note that due to the high (im)migration trends in Egypt during the last few decades, almost all of the affluent youth informants spent the majority of their lives in affluent areas in Cairo unlike their parents. Moreover, a few members of the young generation were brought up in foreign countries, particularly the Gulf region. Therefore one can argue that (im)migration trends and changes in social mobility in the last few decades have grave ramifications on how authenticity is conceived in relation to locality and social class.

A group of men residing in Boulaq who were raised in rural Cairo (all over forty years old) stated that people in the countryside are particularly more religious as they are surrounded by nature, one of God’s many magnificence (See image 17). To prove this point, one man stated that when rural farmers wake up in the morning and witness the ‘glory of God’ in nature, they say ‘*sobhan Allah*’ (in gratitude to God). He continued to say that those that live in the city, on the contrary are continuously busy and spatially surrounded by high constructions and man-made possessions, which blinds them from God’s miracles. This in turn is believed to cause the ‘city people’ or *ahl el-madina* to become less religious. Accordingly, some of the Boulaq interviewees encouraged me

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266 Three types of migration in particular characterize the demography of Arab countries (Hopkins and Ibrahim, 1999). The first is a stream of rural-urban migration within each country, causing swift urbanization in the Arab world. The 64 million Egyptians are clustered in the Nile Delta and Valley, equal to about 4 percent of Egypt’s territory (Hopkins and Ibrahim, 2006). The second is inter-Arab migration, particularly from poor countries to oil-producing rich countries. This type of migration is more current; it reached optimum level in the 1980s. The third is international migration, Arabs immigrating to study, work or reside in Europe, the Americas and Australia. These types of migrations became particularly intensified with Sadat’s open-door policy in the 1970s, were people yearned to improve their lifestyles and accelerate their rate of social mobility (Amin, 2000).

267 *Ahl el-madina* versus the term *Ahl el-asl* which is commonly referred to people from noble descendents or rural areas.
to spend the entire Ramadan in my father’s village as the holy month is perceived to be ‘properly’ or ‘ala osuloh’ (authentically) celebrated there. They noted that at baladi area (encompasses rural and sha’bi areas) like Boulaq, people retain their religious and traditional practices, more than those at affluent parts in urban Cairo.

Baladi is a very important concept that must be elaborated on to understand the link between locality and authenticity. During the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, awlad el-balad or ‘the sons of the country’ was commonly used to refer to Cairo’s scholars, merchants and masses (Ghannam, 2000). However, this concept acquired negative connotations under the British rule, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Egyptian elites, who were previously part of awlad el-balad, associated themselves with dominant Western lifestyle, detached from awlad el-balad which became associated to lower classes. With the end of British colonization and the 1952 revolution, baladi came to be indicated as ‘authenticity and traditionalism in opposition to afrangi or Western upper class’ (Ghannam, 2000: 77).268 As Lila Abu-Lughod (2005) argues, many television serials feature the ebn el-balad who typically lives in one of Cairo’s sha’bi neighborhoods or old lower-class quarters. This form of identity exemplifies Egyptian authenticity at a time when national identity seems intimidated by globalization and transnational Islamism.

The comments made earlier by the group of men in Boulaq corresponds with Bourdieu’s (1979) analysis on how social class tends to determine a person's likes and interests, and how distinctions based on social class gets reinforced in daily life. From this perspective, I argue that those from different social classes define authenticity in synchrony with the resources they have at their disposal. The upper-middle classes emphasize rationality and aesthetic qualities to match the symbolic, social and cultural capital they have at hand. The economically marginalized who lack monetary capital, however, define authentic religiosity as ‘close to nature’ and in non-capitalistic terms.

One key point of criticism that was continuously repeated by informants in Boulaq as undermining the authenticity of the holy month was the presence and attributes of the mesahharati or Ramadan trumpet players at urban Cairo versus baladi

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268 For more on the interconnection between baladi and authenticity, see Armbrust (1996) and El-Hamamsy (1975)
neighborhoods. With the enormous increase in Cairo’s population during the last fifty years, most trumpet players are unable to memorize everyone’s names in the area and thus stopped calling out names. In urban Cairo, the trumpet player no longer wears the traditional turban and *gallabiyya* as he used to long time ago. I once interviewed a trumpeter in his mid twenties whose services covered some areas in the affluent area of Heliopolis. This *mesahharati* was dressed in casual Western clothes: jeans, t-shirt and a baseball cap with the initials ‘NYC’ (New York City) on it. His main motivation in doing the job was to earn an extra income for his education, along with *thawab*, religious merit. During the night, two hours before the start of the fast, he walks around hitting his drum and calling out randomly for people to wake up for *sahur*.

According to the Boulaq informants, in their area, the wake-up call for the *sahur* is still carried out ‘properly’. They assured me with pride that their *mesahharati* still calls out most people by their names and continues to dress in the traditional way. Abu El-Wafā, a 55-year old man who recently moved from rural Boulaq to Hadayek El-Kobba, a more affluent area in Cairo, notes the main differences between trumpet players in both areas:

> At Boulaq the *mesahharati* knows me in person and used to call out my name during the call for *sahur*. In Hadayek the *mesahharati* does not call out names. As you would say, we get more personal service in Boulaq. The *mesahharati* in Boulaq also wears the traditional *gallabiyya*, has a beard, turban and an old drum. At the end of Ramadan, people would go to his house and offer him biscuits, *kahk* (eid sweets), meals, money and sometimes invite him over as an expression of gratitude. The one I see in Hadayak dresses in jeans has hair-gel on and holds an up to date drum. At the end of Ramadan, the Hadayek *mesahharati* goes around the apartments claiming money. The money I would give the *mesahharati* at Hadayek wont be less than LE5 (€0.6)… but the one in Boulaq, if I give him LE2 (€0.24), he will be more than grateful.

Another point that some informants in Boulaq believed to mark a great difference between their district and modern Cairo is the increased sense of togetherness during Ramadan. They explained that Ramadan leisure activities such as baking and exchanging *iftar* meals at *baladi* areas remain to be communally based where friends, family and strangers are all invited to participate. It is also my personal observation that people in Boulaq shared a high sense of cooperation and friendliness. Sitting in a café in Boulaq one Ramadan night, I could notice that nearly everyone there knew each other. Men
warmly greeted one another from across tables and invited each other for a drink or *shisha*. Some of the people who were sitting at the café told me that they have moved to a new urban district in Cairo, yet still prefer to go to Boulaq after *iftar*. They explained that the atmosphere there was more festive, social and thus more ‘Ramadan-like’.

In Boulaq people are still traditional and thus sharing more unity among them...we eat, drink and smoke *shisha* together. We make sure during Ramadan that no one is left out. For example, I may be sitting at the café and someone (stranger) seated near me brings out a snack and invites me to share it with him. In Hadayek (relatively more affluent area) people are Westernized and thus even the neighbors are strangers to one another. But in Boulaq, everyone is family. As you can see, at the café we all know one another by name; if someone misses two nights at the café, we immediately go to his house to check on him. (Abu El-Wafa, 55).

In probing deeply, it becomes apparent that authenticity is highly entangled in ambivalences. While life in the countryside is idealized as authentic, ambivalences exist alongside about its ‘backwardness’, ‘superstitious traditions’, ‘fanatical’ religious movements, ‘vulgarity’, ‘*bia*’ (a slang Egyptian word to mean a person or place with undistinguished values, non-elegant taste or simply dirty) and lack of work opportunities to allow one to advance in the social ladder. Thus, on one hand, many Boulaq informants glorified the authentic values and original Ramadan festivities or *bahga* present at their *baladi* area and criticized leisure activities adopted by affluent youth for its lack of authenticity. On the other hand, those same people spoke of the ignorance and non-hygienic lifestyles at *baladi* areas and their desire to move to the more prosperous parts of Cairo. These affluent areas have better access to education, work opportunities and, thus, increase their chances of social advancement. Furthermore, some lower-class informants who criticized the Ramadan leisure facilities only available at those rich parts of Cairo secretly expressed their desire to access these expensive venues.

Rania is a 22-year old girl whom I got to know in Boulaq that comes from a lower-middle class family. She has a diploma in Tourism and is currently seeking a job. I got to know Rania well in the course of my research. She has always been critical of the dress-style and leisure behavior of upper class women in Ramadan. Nonetheless, after about a year of knowing her well enough, she confided in me her secret wish to access *kheyam Ramadan* that she frequently and openly criticized. Rania’s preferred to keep her
desires disclosed as in her opinion it is shameful for a ‘devout Muslim girl’ like herself to openly reveal her wishes to leisure at those ‘haram’ leisure venues. Below are two interesting discussions I had with Rania at different instances:

(1st Discussion)

Rania: I really despise those girls (rich girls that reside in affluent parts of the city, ns)! I heard in Ramadan they go to those tents (referring to *kheyam Ramadan*, ns) where they dance and sing and wear revealing clothes. *Haram ’alehom!*
Researcher: Why *Haram*?
Rania: Ramadan is about prayers not obscenities! They should come here to Boulaq and we will teach them Ramadan *’ala osuloh* (authentically practiced, ns).
Research: What do you mean by *’ala osuloh*?
Rania: Meaning, prayers, reading the Quran….family union and charity.

(2nd Discussion)

Rania: *Wallahy ya* (I swear to God, ns) Nirvana, I really wish I can go visit one *khayma* some time. I saw in Party magazine photos of all my favorite singers performing there.269 I also saw some of my favorite celebrities there, all dressed in fashionable clothes and looking happy. You know how much I love fashion and music! I would like to go…just once! I envy those rich girls that go there all the time to those fun places. Ramadan in Boulaq is boring. All we do after *iftar* is sit watch television or visit relatives. It is not fair! Ignorance! The men are the ones that get to go out and come back whenever. Ramadan is not fun for me and my sisters in Boulaq. It is supposed to be a festive month…but not here in Boulaq.

One key point raised by Rania reflects on the genderness of the various discourses. What Rania wants for herself is the freedom that not only the rich girls posses, but also the men in her area. The appreciation of the urban-rural and modern-traditional dichotomy may be gendered in the sense of posing different views on how rural women differ from urban women, which may be different from how rural men differ from urban men. In other words, there are different conceptions of urban and rural femininities and masculinities.

Rania’s discontent towards her perceived limited freedom, corresponds to some interesting discussion Newcomb (2009, 157-185) made in her Fes research. The author covers the social biography of a female singer who combined social expectations for a

269 Party is a lifestyle Arabic Magazine. In Ramadan it usually covers stories and publishes photos of public figures attending *kheyam Ramadan.*
proper Moroccan female identity with those she viewed as imported values. The result is
that of endless struggles, negotiations and, for the large part, feelings of alienation from
her home community. Similar to Rania, this singer experienced her social and economic
situation as a ‘prison’ confining her freedom. Again, like Rania, the singer dreamed to
break away from this confinement and go elsewhere to experience more freedom.
Capitalism and dominant gender roles were viewed as the main chains for their
imprisonment.

Moreover, Rania’s viewpoints draw attention to those inconsistencies that
underlie projections on ‘true’ authenticity. While lower-class citizens like Rania may
express discontent towards affluent leisure for its lack of religion or authentic traditions,
simultaneously, many express fascination (and sometimes envy) for the wide array of
lucrative expensive services inaccessible to them.

Many researches on identity in Middle Eastern societies emphasize how the clash
of traditions with Western-style modernization has created pervasive duality, dispute and,
eventually, ambivalences. Barakat (1976, 1990, 1993) has repeatedly criticized
psychological writings on Arabs for ignoring the ‘intense struggle’ among ‘conflicting
value orientations’ that historically shaped Arab culture, a struggle of tradition with
innovation that sets individuals on diverging routes and may separate them from one
another (1990:147). Krichen (1987) and Burgat and Dowell (1993) also addressed the
pervasive cultural dualism which characterizes Egyptian and Middle-Eastern identity,
where individuals seek syntheses between modernity and religious or local traditions.
From a historical examination of Egypt, Zubaida (2004b) argues that there have always
been varied responses towards globalization, among different social groups from the
same society.

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270 For elaborate research on cultural duality, see works by Katherine Ewing. She is renowned for her
anthropological work on the cultural shaping of self by studying individual life histories and demonstrating
the multiple, sometimes contradictory, self representations (1990).
271 Burgat and Dowell (1993:45) note that unlike industrialized societies, underdevelopment shapes
identity differentiation in many Middle Eastern countries so that ‘Dualism in the economy with the
traditional sectors and modern sectors….dualism of urban spaces with the contrast between the median and
the European-style city…dualism of the administration, justice, education, religion, press, artistic and
sports activities…. (also having) psychiatrists on one side and sorcerers or witch doctors on the other…’
272 Zubaida (2004) for example notes that during the Ottoman dynasty, European occupation and
dominance were resisted and welcomed at the same time. Those who accepted it were the elites who were
In line with Ewing (1990), it became apparent that authentication is an ambivalent process of negotiations that occurs among different social groups and individuals themselves. This explains how in examining what ‘authentic’ leisure means in Ramadan, multiple representations exist between various social groups. These variations typically depend on age-group, gender, social class and locality. In addition, contradictory self-representations exist within individuals themselves who continuously negotiate conflicting culture orientations.

6. Conclusion

To conclude, authenticity in Ramadan is sought and realized in the context of Egyptian modernity. In fact, the very search for authenticity is something that only makes sense from the vantage point of modernity. Cultural traditions and religious practices are commonly perceived by the affluent social classes as genuine or ‘authentic’ only if they are compatible with the nation-state’s modernist project for economic development and their consumer/cosmopolitan lifestyles.

The nation-state and its subsidiaries are the main entities that portray how ‘authentic’ traditions and religion is presented and operates within the public sphere in Ramadan. Arab constructs of modernity are accepted as justifiable only if they are continuations of the past and at the same time bound with ideas of economic progress and rationality. Simultaneously, traditions are only appreciated as ‘authentic’ if they are bound with the idea of progress and rationality.

Accordingly, in Ramadan state-owned media and ministry-certified religious preachers present Egyptian-Islamic authenticity as one that supports education, order, rationality, religious tolerance and opposes religious fanaticism, terrorism and acts of disorder. All of those propagated ‘authentic traditions and religious’ traits are key factors that support the economic development of the nation. The nation-state also imposes various policies to combat the political activities of extremist Islamist groups during the sacred month. These Islamist groups capitalize on the communal, religious and charitable

fascinated by European advancements and expressed eagerness to adopt these facets of the dominant culture. The lower-classes however opposed imported foreign culture values.
nature of Ramadan leisure by sponsoring philanthropic projects and promoting their union at mosques. To also preserve the modern image of the city and avoid congestion, the state takes various measures to make sure the *mawa'id al-Rahman* are spread out.

Simultaneously, the nation-state makes use of the holy occasion of Ramadan to declare its continuous commitment to the ethical principles laid down by religion. Senior government officials are known to host numerous *mawa'id al-Rahman* and distribute free food packages every year. In addition, since Ramadan is perceived by Egyptians as a time to celebrate ‘pristine’ Egyptian/Arab traditions, the government sponsors various local culture performances at al-Husayn area. This strategy does not only reflect that the state honors local traditions but it also serves its modernist project through folklorizing those traditions that do not match its modern ambitions.

Egyptian traditions and religious practices that are associated with negative traits are contextualized as folklore culture. Those traditional leisure practices that are based on superstitious and irrational beliefs, threaten economic development and the modern image of the country. They are remodeled and framed in positive terms as folklore and popular heritage were focus is directed on the glory of the past and values such as purity, creativity and originality are evoked. Such approach serves to safe-guard the lifestyle and imagery of a progressive nation and fulfill the tourists or upper-classes’ yearn for the aesthetic past.

For upper-middle class female youth, the quest for the aesthetic authentic is highly thrived for in Ramadan. These desires are mainly fulfilled through the consumption of local commodities, preferably those that match their modern lifestyles. This social group leads rushed and healthy lifestyles which greatly affected their choices of which local Ramadan products to consume or practices to take part in. They thus favor those traditional food items that are low in fat, made with easy-to-do recipes, readily packaged and, if possible, delivered directly to their homes. Also due to upper-middle classes’ rushed lifestyles, the duration of many cultural performances are significantly cut down. As for modern tastes, many traditional items are re-modeled to keep up with global fashion. The *fanus, gallabiyya* and many other traditional items found in the market today come in trendy colors and designs. Also modern ethical considerations (such as
fair trade) and nationalistic sentiments influence this social groups’ purchase decision-making.

Several issues come to the fore in the process of upper-middle classes’ consumption of authentic Ramadan items. The status/value of authentic markers usually associated with the poor and the economically marginalized changes significantly when re-defined as products of lavishness and consumed by the elitists. The high-price imposed at all the elitist authentic commodities/spaces enhances new differential markers of social class. In addition, strict police and security measures at almost all the expensive leisure spaces to combat possible ‘threats’ (theft, sexual harassment, dirtiness, chaos) initiated by the poor masses further alienates social classes from one another.

It also became evident that the realization of authenticity in Ramadan is a process of struggle and ambivalences, which is not only debated between different social groups but within persons themselves. This is clearly apparent in how the notion of *baladi* is perceived today in Egypt. On one side, *ebn el-balad* represents someone who upholds authentic values like generosity, chivalry and knows how to ‘best’ practice Ramadan. On the other, it is associated with someone who is uneducated, not hygienic, unrefined taste and thus defies economic progress. In the view of the nation-state and the young upper-middle classes, habits that enable personal and economic development are the ones that stand for ‘true’ authenticity Islamic and Egyptian ‘authenticity’. These progressive habits should particularly be emphasized in the holy month as it stands for what is ‘ideal’ Islam and local culture.