



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is a rapidly developing country. According to a common assumption in media and scholarship, however, this development has come with a price: The UAE's expanding expatriate population has led Emiratis to become more diligent about asserting their national identity. Many suggest that, in celebrating their national culture and local heritage, Emiratis have effectively isolated themselves from expatriates—both physically and symbolically.

In what follows, this paper approaches these issues through an ethnographic lens and identifies the above understanding of Emirati national identity as a form of stereotype. It argues that the stereotype of Emiratis who culturally isolate themselves is challenged by the behavior of Emiratis in the emirate of Ras Al Khaimah. Observers who contend that Emiratis do not typically interact with expatriates may be, at best, basing their view on experiences rooted in emirates such as Dubai and Abu Dhabi, but this perspective cannot account for Emiratis as a whole. In contrast to stereotypes about Emirati identity and the social isolation that it produces, it appears possible for Emiratis in Ras Al Khaimah to maintain a sense of national identity while interacting with expatriates. The important point to grasp, from this discussion, is that Emiratis value their identity in many different and often individualized ways, making generalizations about their national identity dubious.

Emirati Identity and Social Interaction in the Emirate of Ras Al Khaimah

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Methodology

The following observations were carried out over approximately eight months of research in the UAE from 2012 to 2014. The empirical substance comes from participant observation of and semi-structured interviews concerning interactions between young Emirati citizens and non-Emirati residents on the UAE's National Day celebrations and on the multicultural campus of the American University of Ras Al Khaimah (AURAK).

This research focuses on young Emiratis because they are, in many ways, the target audience of national identity discussions in the UAE. It is the Emirati youth in particular who are often perceived as being in danger of losing their national identity to the pressures of globalization, yet there has been little research done from an ethnographic point of view on how young Emiratis demonstrate their different perspectives on Emirati identity (The Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research, 2009). Research also focused on AURAK because, as a multinational university campus, it is a site of cross-cultural interaction—a learning and working environment that facilitates daily encounters among young Emiratis and non-nationals. The research focused on men, however, for pragmatic reasons. As the researcher is a Danish male, participant observation and semi-structured interviews about national identity among Arab Muslim women would have been difficult to achieve without potential cultural insensitivity on the part of the researcher.

The methodological approach of this paper, then, is ethnographic. This means that the researcher (henceforth referred to as "I" or "me") will follow the general practice of ethnographic research by writing in first person (Hastrup, 1992). Therefore, the data and observations that follow have been seen and heard by me.

In policy discussions, ethnographic approaches raise potential difficulties because an ethnographic study of national identity is by nature a qualitative rather than quantitative endeavor (Hastrup, 1992; Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008). Therefore, when considering the policy implications of this study, the following observations should not be taken as a representative study about Emirati national identity based on interactions between "Emiratis" and "non-Emiratis." Nevertheless, ethnography can show some of the complex individual negotiations that are involved in national identity, but that are difficult to capture in larger surveys. What follows is an argument for supplementing the use of general labels such as "Emirati" and "non-Emirati" with insight into how these labels function in individual life stories and in regional settings.

Image 1



Emirati Identity and Self-segregation

In recent decades, Emiratis have expressed the importance of their national identity through heritage endeavors such as camel racing, falconry, poetry, building wind towers, date festivals, national celebrations (including National Day and Flag day), pearling museums, and heritage villages (Exell & Rico, 2014; Khalaf, 1999; Wakefield, 2012). Why is this the case?

"You must understand," an Emirati academic once told me in Dubai, "that our history is a history of gain and pain." His point was that "traditional" or "authentic" Emirati identity is important in light of the country's rapid development and the accompanying immigration of expatriates from all over the world. His explanation also echoes in the media. When local commentator Sultan Al Qassemi proposed introducing formal citizenship procedures for educated Arab expatriates, the "Call to Naturalize Some Expats"—as a headline in Reuters read—stirred "anxiety in the UAE" (Habboush, 2013).

What the debate over Sultan Al Qassemi's proposal suggests is that globalization and immigration in the UAE are often viewed as threats to Emirati culture. Specifically, the debate indicates that many individuals feel that Emirati cultural distinctives will dissolve as Emiratis become a minority in their own

country. It is not surprising, then, that the connection made between Emirati identity and cultural threat perception is a part of scholarship on the UAE. As Fred H. Lawson and Hasan M. Al Naboodah write:

The oil boom has attracted large numbers of expatriate laborers who brought with them the icons and mores of their respective homelands. By the early 1990s, popular culture in the UAE consisted almost entirely of idioms, symbols, and practices that originated outside the country. Faced with these trends, a number of influential actors took steps to encourage greater public awareness and appreciation of older forms of cultural expression. (Lawson, et al., 2008, pp. 15-16)

Indeed, Oliver Picton asserts that "globalization and modernity have threatened what some nationals imagine to be 'authentic' Emirati culture and heritage" to an extent that "these fears have been translated into the politicized government policy of heritage revival" (Picton, 2010, p. 69). For instance, the "invention of camel culture," writes Sulayman Khalaf, "provides links to the historical past of the Emirates' pastoral way of life that has been swept away by oil-triggered modernization." (Khalaf, 2000, p. 244).

The story about Emiratis' cultural threat perceptions, self-segregation, and national identity has recently been explored by Miriam Cooke in *Tribal Modern: Branding New Nations in the Arab Gulf*, a book-length study about national identity, tribal heritage, and modernity in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. "A chasm," she writes, "yawns between the native citizens and both sets of others: the educated cosmopolitans and the laboring underclass" (Cooke, 2014, p. 24). That is why, according to Cooke, "national day celebrations carefully segregate national citizens from migrant workers" (Cooke, 2014, p. 68). That is why, when it comes to national dress, "Gulf Arabs are increasingly donning a uniform that turns every public appearance into a performance of national identity" (Cooke, 2014, p. 124). The perspective on national identity that emerges from Cooke's text, in other words, treats national dress ("uniform") in the Arab Gulf as though it has one specific, collective purpose: namely, the performance of national identity.

In certain media and scholarship, then, Emirati identity is associated with the group's self-segregation within the UAE's society—through distinguishing dress and behavior—because of the perception that non-Emiratis threaten national identity. Emirati self-segregation is evident in the emirate of Dubai, according to Pernilla Ouis and Asef Bayat, while Cooke argues that the phenomenon is characteristic of the Arab Gulf as a whole (Bayat, 2010; Cooke, 2014; Ouis, 2011).

The next section, however, argues that while Cooke's observations *may* represent Dubai's context, it is problematic to generalize them to the entire Arab Gulf. Indeed, observations of National Day celebrations in Ras Al Khaimah indicate that assumptions like Cooke's should not be generalized across the country, let alone the region.

National Day in the Emirate of Ras Al Khaimah

National Day in the emirate of Ras Al Khaimah presents a different picture of Emirati identity than the one described by Cooke. The public center of National Day is the Corniche Al Qawasim, an oblong stretch of land along the natural creek near Ras Al Khaimah City. With a view of Ras Al Khaimah's twin skyscrapers, the neighborhoods of Al Nakheel and Al Uraibi, acres of green mangroves, and the Hajar Mountains, the physical appearance of Corniche Al Qawasim is exceptionally varied (Image 1). Not surprisingly, the Corniche is one of the most popular outdoor spaces in Ras Al Khaimah, where residents take walks, exercise, and relax on benches, on lawns, and in cafés.

At the epicenter of Ras Al Khaimah's National Day celebrations, festivities spilled onto the Corniche's paved walking paths, manicured lawns, and Al Qawasim Corniche Road itself. On the road, both Emiratis and non-Emiratis drove cars decorated with emblems of Emirati identity, including flags, portraits of sheikhs, and national slogans. Children who wore red, green, white, and black (the UAE's national colors) popped through open car windows and roofs. The majority of the decorated cars (Image 3) were driven by Emiratis.

Despite the obvious displays of patriotism, the details of this event pose a challenge to the virtual consensus that Emirati celebrations of national pride—quintessential expressions of Emirati identity—invariably exclude non-Emiratis. In recent years in Ras Al Khaimah, the most spectacularly decorated car at the Corniche's National Day exhibition was driven by a Pakistani man from Lahore who claims that this is his perennial custom at National Day celebrations (Image 2). On the walking paths, both Emirati and non-Emirati youth (mostly South Asians and expatriate Arabs) celebrated the holiday by spraying foam on one another. Meanwhile, an Afghan man walked around the Corniche on stilts while wearing the UAE's national colors. Another Afghan donned a baseball cap with a green, white, and red propeller. Emirati and South Asian men proceeded together down the sidewalk while holding a large Emirati flag—approximately two meters wide and five meters long. Their portable loud speaker played songs about the Emirates. Instances like these may suggest

Image 2



that Emiratis did not feel their heritage was threatened or appropriated by their expatriate neighbors, even as they participated in celebrations of Emirati nationalism.

On the lawn and a safe distance away from the spray foam, families picnicked together. Assuming that family meals represent fairly intimate undertakings, it is significant that South Asian, Emirati, and non-Emirati Arab families picnicked in close proximity to each other in a communal space.

In and of themselves, however, such interactions during National Day celebrations must be interpreted with caution. At a minimum, these observations are the initial indications that the dominant story about Emirati identity and self-segregation may be, at the individual level, more complicated and more context-specific than many believe. At least in contrast to Cooke's point that national days carefully segregate national citizens from migrant workers and other expatriates, U.A.E. National Day celebrations in Ras Al Khaimah suggest that Emirati nationals and non-nationals can gather in the same space to express their mutual identification with the Emirates.

Evidence from National Day celebrations is not in itself sufficient to debunk the stereotype that perceived cultural threats to national identity produce self-segregation among Emiratis. It is important, at this point, to distinguish between interaction and

Image 3



perception. That some Emiratis in Ras Al Khaimah *interact* with expatriates who have adopted symbols of national identity does not mean that Emiratis accept the expatriates' behavior. Moreover, it could be argued that National Day in Ras Al Khaimah is an exceptional event in terms of behavioral norms related to the expression of Emirati identity.

When observations of National Day interactions are integrated with my conversations and interviews with Emiratis and non-Emiratis in Ras Al Khaimah City, however, a specific picture of Ras Al Khaimah emerges, one of how interaction is perceived to be different there than in other emirates. In interviews with Emiratis and non-Emiratis about interaction in Ras Al Khaimah, I often used National Day celebrations as a significant example of the question I was interested in, namely: Why does there appear to be dissonance between the dominant narrative about Emirati identity expressed as self-segregation on the one hand, and the intercultural interactions I witnessed in Ras Al Khaimah on the other hand?

According to several of my Emirati and non-Emirati interviewees, interaction between locals and

expatriates is common in Ras Al Khaimah City. One day, as we were discussing my background as an Arabic student in Yemen, a male AURAK student of Syrian origin asked me, "So, you said you were studying Arabic in Yemen. What do you think about Yemenis?" I answered that I remember Yemenis as extremely kind, generous, and inclusive, and then he replied, "Well, the locals here are kind of like Yemenis. If I'm in trouble, they will help me out. They're so friendly here. In [other places], they are selfish. They don't help you there."

One evening, I drove around ("car-rounded")¹ Ras Al Khaimah City with Saqr,² a 21-year-old Emirati student at AURAK. A South Asian tea seller soon approached Saqr's car with tea. "Did you see how I ordered tea from the guy?" Saqr asked as we drove. "His name is Murshid. We can joke together, and I respect him. I look at him when I pay for the tea. If this had [not been in Ras Al Khaimah], I would just have done like this," Saqr said, as he imitated throwing a coin out of the window without looking at the attendant.

Abdul, another Emirati citizen, lends credence to the perception that there is a closer interaction between locals and non-locals in Ras Al Khaimah than exists in other places. Born and raised in Ras Al Khaimah City and a former high school student at Ras Al Khaimah Academy, he is now pursuing a university degree at the Higher Colleges of Technology (HCT), where nearly all students hold Emirati citizenship. Yet for Abdul, the nearby AURAK, with its mix of ethnicities and gender, is where he interacts with his non-Emirati friends, most of them children of Arab expatriate parents. "Five out of seven days," as he phrases it, Abdul goes to AURAK's campus to socialize with his friends when classes finish.

Despite his affinity for expatriates, Abdul describes his family as "traditional" and "local" (in the sense of "Emirati"). "So sometimes," Abdul says, "they wonder why I'm not with more locals, but, I mean, I grew up with my Arab friends in school, so it is natural for me to hang out with them. Some locals only went to school with other locals, so that's probably why they don't interact that much [with expatriates]."

When asked to explain why the media tends to focus on Emiratis who are afraid to lose their identity as a result of immigration, Abdul says, "Media always exaggerate, but in [other emirates], Emiratis are more fearsome to lose [sic] their identity because there are so few [of them]. Here in [Ras Al Khaimah], there's a majority of Emiratis, so we are not that afraid. It's becoming more segregated, but it's like one big neighborhood here."

¹ Car-rounding is an evening activity wherein Arab and Emirati youth drive up and down Ras Al Khaimah's waterfront, usually while drinking karak, which is a sweet, milky tea.

² All names have been changed by author.

For example, the neighborhood of Al Nakheel is predominantly inhabited by South Asians, but it is normal to encounter Emiratis there, in their national dress, at local cafés. In fact, several of these Emiratis speak Hindi/Urdu publicly and have South Asians as longstanding friends.

In other words, both Saqr and Abdul interact with non-Emiratis in two ways. First, Abdul and Saqr choose to interact personally with non-locals. Second, they attribute their behavior to Ras Al Khaimah's context. As one of Abdul's Sudanese friends told me, it was only when he moved to Ras Al Khaimah that he began to have Emirati friends: "Abdul," he said, "was my first Emirati friend."

Yet this is not to say that all contexts in Ras Al Khaimah are culturally integrated. When the former residents of Al Jazeerah Al Hamra, an abandoned fishing village in the southern part of the emirate, return from Abu Dhabi to their village to celebrate their heritage once a year, the affair is almost exclusively Emirati. The same homogeneity can be observed in several cafés located in Ras Al Khaimah City.

Indeed, while most of my interviewees at AURAK perceived interaction between Emiratis and expatriates to be more substantive in Ras Al Khaimah than in other areas in the UAE, Emiratis perceive this interaction differently, and these differences are significant. One Emirati AURAK student from Ras Al Khaimah's mountain areas, for instance, told me that while he interacts with non-Emirati Arab friends everyday, still he sees a difference between Emirati and non-Emirati Arabs, particularly in terms of hygiene, patience, and propriety: Non-Emirati Arabs, when in the desert, care less about collecting the trash than Emiratis do, he maintains. Also, while he often has no problem waiting to eat until after his bus ride home, he reported that non-Emirati Arabs sometimes insist that the bus stop for food. My interviewee also characterized expatriate Arabs as more unruly in their parking habits. The point of these observations is not necessarily that the source's interpretations are accurate, but that they are relevant to this investigation of stereotypes about Emirati identity and self-segregation. This report must be sensitive towards how individual Emiratis might stress that they are different from non-Emiratis, even if the non-Emiratis are also Arab and are their friends.

National Dress in Ras Al Khaimah

Male national dress is, like National Day, perceived in media and scholarship to be an important expression of Emirati identity, yet each Emirati's view of the kandora is nuanced. The classical male Emirati dress, mostly referred

to as kandora, includes a long, white robe (the kandora); a white head garment (ghutra); and a black, solid cord (iqal) tied around the head. The kandora is taken as evidence that Emiratis closely guard their national identity by expressing it consistently and publicly through their dress (Khalaf, 2005). Saqr, for instance, wears his kandora everyday on HCT's campus. "The kandora is really important for being Emirati," he explains. "It is really important. I mean, we're so overpopulated, there [are] so few of us here in the UAE, so people have to recognize us."

Yet not all Emiratis wear national dress at all times. When I first met Abdul on the afternoon of National Day, he was dressed in plain clothes (a gray t-shirt), with no apparent difference in style of dress between him and his Sudanese friend. In later interviews, he explained:

There are several of my classmates who wear iqal and ghutra, but I don't. It's just too big of a hassle. I wear kandora when I feel like it or when I'm not in the lab; it's like a 50/50 balance. At Higher Colleges of Technology, I wear it everyday because it's like a uniform, but most of the time, outside, I don't wear kandora. Like, there are even some Emiratis who wear kandora when they go to the bars, and that is just so inappropriate.

Abdul's point is that even though some Emiratis do not wear kandora regularly, this is not necessarily because they feel less Emirati. On the contrary, in some contexts, it can be respectful of Emirati identity not to wear kandora. Moreover, the kandora is not always seen as a dimension of national identity. Wearing the robe-like garment can also be understood as matter of comfort. While Saqr confided to me that he sometimes does not wear the iqal because it gives him a headache, another Emirati interviewee, a male AURAK student, told me, "You know, I often just wear the kandora because it makes me look a little slimmer."

Another complication of national dress is that the kandora is not only worn by Emiratis who have formal Emirati citizenship. AURAK student Mahmoud and his parents hold Iranian passports, yet many of Mahmoud's cousins are Emirati citizens. The reasons for their different citizenship statuses are historical and geographical: Mahmoud's family originates from the Island of Qeshm, which belongs to Iran. Until the UAE was unified in 1971, Mahmoud's family moved freely between Qeshm and Ras Al Khaimah for trading purposes. When the UAE formed, though, his family was divided—in terms of citizenship—on the basis of who had migrated to Ras Al Khaimah before and after the Emirates' unification.

Despite Mahmoud's Iranian passport, he self-identifies as Emirati. He asked me whether I knew a certain

popular singer and said, "He is from my tribe, and he is Emirati. My cousins are my closest friends, and many of them are Emirati. There is no difference between them and me—except in visa situations, of course." From an aesthetic perspective, Mahmoud wears kandora every day at the campus of AURAK, most often in plain white, without the iqal and with the ghutra folded neatly around his head, which is predominantly a youth practice and understood to be a less formal style than the iqal/ghutra combination.

What is significant about Mahmoud's description of how he wears kandora is that he perceives the dress to be about identity, but not mainly about Emirati identity. Rather, Mahmoud associates U.A.E. national dress with family and Islamic identity. "I wear kandora everyday," he said, "because I don't want to distract the ones that [sic] pray next to me in the mosque. Some people also wear kandora in different colors than white—like yellow or blue—but I don't do that either. It is important in my family to be simple and humble."

Expatriate Arabs sometimes adopt the kandora as well, including a Palestinian student at AURAK. The kandora, then, is worn by both Emiratis and non-Emiratis and is associated with respect for national identity among both groups. Yet Emiratis also regard national dress in terms of fashion, as well as comfort and aesthetics. The corollary is that, when Emiratis and non-Emiratis interact, it is certainly possible for Emiratis to maintain a deep sense of national identity based on a variety of factors. These manifestations of national identity are often individualized, which can make them difficult to decipher through observation alone.

In summary, these ethnographic observations from the emirate of Ras Al Khaimah suggest that the stereotypical connections often made about Emirati identity, perceived cultural threats to that identity, and Emiratis' self-segregation ought to be treated carefully. We cannot simply assume that stereotypes like those found in Cooke's work are universally applicable. Experiences of Emirati identity differ among emirates and even from one Emirati to another Emirati. Both male national dress and National Day are often seen as essential demonstrations of Emirati national identity, yet neither wearing kandora nor celebrating National Day in Ras Al Khaimah necessarily supports the idea that Emiratis separate themselves from expatriates because they see expatriates as threats to their national culture.

Policy Recommendations

Two policy recommendations follow from these considerations. First, insofar as mutual cultural awareness is both a positive virtue and not necessarily a danger to national identity, I propose that policymakers

sustain and develop spaces for cross-cultural, public interaction in future city planning efforts. Second, in order to facilitate a nuanced understanding of how cross-cultural interaction and national identity can co-exist in multicultural work environments, I propose that employers and their employees listen not just to general accounts of Emirati identity but also to individual narratives of how and why Emirati identity matters.

Establish multicultural spaces. Spaces that seem uniquely Emirati are highly valuable in their own right, and the purpose of this paper is not to devalue spaces in which Emiratis nurture their traditional cultural expressions. At the same time, it appears that other spaces in Ras Al Khaimah City accommodate social interaction in a way which, according to my sources, is also valuable. In a policy context, it is significant that multicultural spaces promote cross-cultural interactions that lead to more accurate and respectful understandings of Emirati identity. Promoting cultural awareness as a way to preserve national identity is also important amid globalization. Therefore, intercultural spaces like restaurants and parks can function as educational forums that complement national identity in the UAE and promote respectful cultural exchanges. For these reasons, city planners in Ras Al Khaimah should consider preserving and promoting spaces that facilitate multicultural interaction as an integral part of future urban development in the emirate.

Listen to individual life stories. From my interviews with students at AURAK, it appears that Emirati identity matters, but it matters in different ways to different individuals—and it does not matter only to individuals with Emirati citizenship. This means that in multicultural learning environments and work spaces, understanding how Emirati identity and mores matter is crucial—not only in terms of Emiratis as a collective, but also for individual Emiratis, who conceive of their identity in distinctive ways.

In other words, the stereotyping of Emiratis that occurs in work place interactions can potentially be transformed into mutual understanding among Emiratis and expatriates by communicating to non-Emiratis that they are interacting with not simply *an* Emirati but with *this* Emirati, *this* individual. The complement is also true: Emiratis can benefit from pursuing a more nuanced understanding of their American, British, Filipino, or Indian coworkers. Emiratis, too, should learn to consider other people not as one Indian or American out of many but as *a particular* American or Indian, or *an individual* Briton or Filipino. Such mutual understandings of nationality and individuality can be facilitated by arranging workshops or informal meetings in which different co-workers are given the opportunity to present their own life stories, interests, and perspectives and to explain these have shaped their understandings of national identity.

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