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MEMO FROM DUBAI

Beyond Skimpy Skirts, a Rare Debate on Identity



Tamara Abdul Hadi for The New York Times

In Dubai, locals remain distant from expatriates in their midst. A short skirt can violate a local ban, but such rules are rarely enforced. During this Ramadan, some Muslims have complained of a lack of spiritual tone.

By **HASSAN M. FATTAH**
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DUBAI, [United Arab Emirates](#), Oct. 18 — South Asians call it “the best run Indian city,” Arabs celebrate it as a model of Arab accomplishment, and Westerners embrace it for its endless sunshine and luxury lifestyle.

With more than 150 nationalities and almost as many expressions of culture, Dubai is one of the most diverse cities in the Middle East.

But after decades of selling dreams to foreigners, this Persian Gulf emirate has begun debating the limits of multiculturalism.

Tensions burst into the open in early October when an English-language newspaper published an article protesting the growing disrespect for Muslim customs here during Ramadan, setting off a rare public debate about Dubai’s cultural identity.

“Too much flesh on show is wrong in a Muslim country at any time — but offense is being felt especially during Ramadan,” said the front-page editorial in 7Days, a free daily tabloid.

The article appeared with photographs of women in sleeveless tops and short skirts at a shopping mall under the headline, “Show Some Respect.” 7Days, which is run and edited largely by Westerners, advised its readers to “please remember that this is a Muslim country and many of us are guests here.”

Within hours, the newspaper was flooded with e-mail messages and phone calls, many praising the paper for acknowledging the sensitivities of Muslims but others lambasting it for seeming to toe an official line.

Soon the entire emirate was talking.

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“We fear that the expatriate is going to impose his culture on us,” said Maya Rashid Ghadeer, a columnist with the daily Al Bayan in Dubai who writes about the local community. “Most locals are afraid that they are losing their basic identity forever.”

For decades the emirate, part of the federation of seven principalities that make up the United Arab Emirates, has sought to broaden its economy by welcoming foreigners and their investment dollars, turning itself into a shipping hub, a regional business hub and more recently a tourist hub with luxury hotels and resorts.

The city’s openness, limited corruption and stability have helped spur economic growth and development, with wide swaths under construction and more projects in the works. The boom has brought big-city problems like inflation, a rise in crime and divorce rates and snarled traffic.

But beyond that, it has taken a toll on local culture as many young Emiratis have begun looking abroad, abandoning many traditions and even marrying foreigners. With only about 250,000 citizens, out of a total 1.2 million residents, the demographics are daunting, said Abdulkhaliq Abdallah, a professor of political science at United Arab Emirates University.

“Usually minorities assimilate into the majority,” Mr. Abdallah said. “But we don’t want to assimilate into the majority. We want to preserve the localness, the Emiratiness of this city.”

At the same time, Dubai is famous for offering a kind of [Disneyland](#) fantasy to its legions of tourists. It has an indoor ski slope, Western department stores, even Christmas trees during that season, often making it hard to remember where one is.

Many outsiders say that is what makes Dubai stand out in the region, and the reaction by some to the article on Muslim modesty involved some pushing back.

“Hello, this is 2006, not 1666,” wrote one reader, who demanded to know what was wrong with the clothing styles. “Does Dubai want to move forward in time where women are no longer regarded as second class citizens?”

“You could say we took a fair bit of stick for the story,” said Tony Metcalf, editorial director for 7Days, who said he received more than 500 letters and e-mail messages regarding the story in just two days. Mr. Metcalf emphasized that the response, by both Muslim and non-Muslim readers, crossed ethnic and religious lines, but it underscored the level of tension that existed.

The switchboards at local radio stations lit up. James Piecowye, a talk show host, said he had devoted several broadcasts to the subject, with both expatriates and locals openly debating an issue that has long been kept behind closed doors.

“There is this pressure to stake out your claims, especially with the locals,” Mr. Piecowye said. “There is more and more pressure to say, ‘This is how things should be.’”

Dubai, for example, has long had strict rules about public behavior — a man and woman kissing in public can be arrested; one can be ticketed for dress baring too much skin, or for eating or smoking during daylight hours during Ramadan, and altercations with locals can sometimes land expatriates in detention.

But with millions of tourists passing through here, few such laws are carried out.

Ramadan, which ends this weekend, is a month when Muslims fast during daylight as part of what is supposed to be an intense focus on spirituality, breaking fast when the sun sets. This Ramadan, however, stores stayed open throughout the day, rather than closing for the afternoon, and many restaurants served food during fasting hours; hotels served alcohol at night after breaking fast. Local Muslims as well as those from abroad have continued to complain of a lack of Ramadan spirit as compared with previous years.

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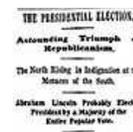
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“This is still a salad platter with a tomato and cucumber that don’t mix,” Mr. Abdallah says, emphasizing that Dubai can never be a melting pot because foreigners are ineligible for citizenship. “It is a massive experiment in social tolerance and it should be promoted as such. But being tolerant should not come at the expense of the local and national identity.”

At least part of the tensions stem from the deep cultural divide here. For the most part, locals tend to live apart from expatriates and rarely interact socially with them.

As in many Persian Gulf states, Dubai’s ethnic groups also exist in defined socioeconomic stratifications — locals are typically owners, Westerners earn the top salaries and South Asians do the menial labor.

As inflation has set in, the economic divide has heightened the cultural divide, Mr. Abdallah and others say.

“Here you don’t taste the cultural food, and you don’t have a chance to wear the clothes, because there is no mandate to do so,” said Rima Sabban, a sociologist at Emirates University. “There is nothing for you to do, there is no one culture for you to learn. The model that nationals have provided is that it’s O.K. to stay close to your community.”

Seizing on that separation, the Sheik Mohammed Center for Cultural Understanding, has organized tours and meals in the homes of locals for expatriates. At a shopping mall this month, Khulood al-Atiyat and other college students have operated a booth inviting shoppers to meet and speak with an Emirati.

“People see us as these creatures walking in their midst,” Ms. Atiyat said. “They see these aliens wearing all black or white, which they think means we are closing ourselves off. This is a place where they can come and talk to us and ask questions.”

A new, high-tech Dubai Museum offers exhibitions and events on Dubai’s roots.

“The U.A.E. remains a Muslim and Arab country — we will still wear our abayas and our shail,” Ms. Atiyat said, referring to the women’s robes. “We are proud of who we are and we intend to stick to who we are.”

Nada El Sawy contributed reporting.

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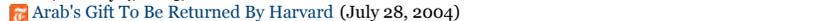
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