# CULTURAL CHANGE IN THE ARAB GULF; NATURAL PROGRESSION OR IMPERIALIST PLOT?

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**Abstract**

This paper begins by examining Noor's (2011) position that the countries of the Arab World have diverse cultures, histories and needs. And that the West (however defined) has made the mistake of homogenizing this diversity. The paper then turns to the Arab Gulf, demonstrating that, despite commentators like Denman (2013) and Asadi (2012;2013) who persist in seeing the Muslim-Arab World as an entity, the six states of the Arab Gulf Cooperation Council are equally diverse. This paper draws on Roscoe's (2013) suggestion that once cultures meet, touch and evolve, there are automatic implications for identity, but that these implications are not necessarily negative. The paper offers examples of changes in cultural assumption in the Arab Gulf in the past 30 years, and demonstrates how these changes can be regarded as progressive or detrimental according to different cultural viewpoints.

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## Introduction

In the summer of 2011, Masi Noor, the Senior Lecturer in Social Psychology at Canterbury Christchurch University, referred to the events of the Arab Spring, saying "We in the West have been guilty of homogenizing the whole region. We need to understand that they are all very different countries with diverse cultures, histories and needs, which until now we have not listened to, either due to ignorance or expedience." (Noor 2011; 11-12)

The truth of the first part of that statement ought to be self-evident to any reflective practitioner who has worked in the Arab World for any length

of time, but Noor's use of the terms "ignorance or expedience" raises questions. I would suggest that even scholars may have a tendency to employ general, shorthand terms when more detailed analysis may be required. What, for example, does Noor himself intend by "the West"? In the Arab Gulf, "the West" almost automatically refers to the USA and Britain, or Britain and the USA, depending on which country one is in. In Tunisia and Algeria, by contrast, "the West" usually refers to France, and in Morocco, the term could be used of France, or even Spain which maintains its enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla on the Mediterranean Coast.

**Culture**

House (2009) claims that there have been two traditional views of culture. The first is the humanistic view, capturing "the 'cultural heritage' as a model of refinement and an exclusive collection of a community's masterpieces in literature, fine arts, music etc" (House, 2009; 109). This view places value on "high" and exclusive culture, which is frequently the product of wealth and leisure. It disregards everything else. Put simply, the architecture of the palace is admired; the houses of its builders are ignored.

Then there is the anthropological concept of culture, focusing on how communities live their lives – "all those traditional, explicit and implicit designs that act as potential guides for group members' behavioural patterns" (House, 2009; 109). In this approach, behaviour defines culture, and that behaviour can be sub-divided into behaviour deemed "inappropriate" or "appropriate" – that is, appropriate in the eyes of the community, according to social standing, age or gender.

House also, however, admits that "with the rise of post-modernist, cultural studies-inspired thinking, the whole notion of culture has come under attack." (House, 2009; 110). In this post-modernist critique there is no such thing as "pure culture", because stable social groups do not exist. The behaviour of individuals and external influences constantly destabilize groups, with the result that the concept of culture is little more than a shorthand term, the idealization of a concept that primarily serves to reduce the differences between people living in any one area.

**Arab-Muslim Culture**

It is this same shorthand, or simplification, that leads McConachy and Hata (2013; 300) to urge that "learners need to be encouraged to move beyond the view that one nation has one culture with one set of norms" and yet we still find papers with titles like "Cultural Divide between Arab-Muslim students and Western Literature; Implication for the English Language Classroom" (Denman 2012). Denman is currently doing research on English literature and Arab-Muslim identity at the Sultan Qaboos

University, but his paper appears to be based on the assumption that there is a single Arab-Muslim identity to begin with, and some might argue that this is, again, "homogenizing."

Certainly, most Arabs are Muslim, but most Muslims are not, in fact, Arabs. A pamphlet issued by the Islamic Information Centre of the Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque points out that only 20% of Muslims are Arabs. The most populous Muslim nation is Indonesia. Then come Bangladesh and Pakistan. Even in India, the Muslim minority numbers 160 million, which is twice the population of the largest Arab nation, Egypt. And Egypt is only 90% Muslim.

Secondly, books like *Beyond the Veil; Male-Female Dynamics in a Muslim Society* (Mernissi 1975), add to the confusion by implying that the cultural dynamics of a single Arab country are true of all Islamic societies. Mernissi's study is an important example of how not to present research, and Saqi Books ought to have known better than to publish it under the present title.

Mernissi does indeed offer an investigation of gender relations in "a Muslim Society", if we read "a Muslim society" as meaning a single society that happens to be Muslim. Her society of choice, however, is Morocco, which is both geographically at the extreme edge of the Arab World, and unusual in as much as it has a significant Berber minority. Mernissi's informants, furthermore, were all women in late middle age, which means that they were born in the 1920s, at the time of the French/Spanish protectorates. In those days, and uniquely in Morocco, it was customary for pre-pubescent girls to become engaged, and go to live with their fiancés' families. The formal marriage did not take place until the girl entered puberty, but even then, it meant that most brides were only 13 or, at the most, 14 years old.

When the Kingdom of Morocco became independent in 1956, the nationalist government raised the age of marriage to 18. It must be admitted that, in the remoter mountain villages of Morocco, teenage marriages still occur, but even in 1977 it was highly misleading to suggest that child marriage was the Moroccan norm, and that it was customary across the entire Muslim World.

**Arab-Gulf Culture and Change.**

Both Denman and Mernissi, therefore, appear to suggest (possibly unwittingly) that cultures are fixed. The same can also be said for Asadi (2013) although her arguments are more deeply rooted in simple ignorance.

Asadi is an Iranian-American who works at the Al Faisal University, a private female institution in Riyadh. This is an important point, as it means that Asadi has probably never interacted with Saudis outside the classroom.

Her research is based on a questionnaire circulated among her students, and on interviews with *TWO* (my emphasis) other female expatriates, though her questions seem to have been less than searching. This much can be seen from three statements from her informants.

(a) "A lot of their beliefs contrast my own, so I just have the urge to educate them" (P. 85) is a classic example of denigrating "the generalised characteristics of anyone who is different from the unproblematical Self" (Holliday 2005; 19). Your beliefs are different from mine, so YOU need educating. This is an attitude that could be characterised as smug, ignorant and self-complacent, but its offensive ethnocentricity is magnified when we remember that this speaker voluntarily moved into another culture and is now attempting to impose her own conception of "the unproblematical self" in that environment.

(b) "I hold dear the rights of a free and secular democracy for everyone regardless of race or creed" (P. 87) is a comment that screams for a definition of terms and an exploration of its own internal contradictions. Exactly which "free and secular democracy" does the speaker have in mind? In Britain, politicians tend to avoid open reference to religion, but the Monarch is the Supreme Governor of the Church of England, and one of her titles is Defender of the Faith. Britain also has a bi-cameral parliament, but members of the upper chamber, the House of Lords, are not elected, they are selected as a result of recommendations put forward by the leaders of the principal political parties represented in the House of Commons. In France, where devotion to secular sentiment has resulted in overtly religious symbols such as the Muslim hijab, and turbans for Sikh males being banned in schools, the summer of 2013 saw massive demonstrations by Roman Catholics against the decision to allow same-sex marriage; one protester taking things to the extent that he committed suicide at the high altar of the Cathedral of Notre Dame. In the USA, where state and church are constitutionally separated, it has become impossible for any candidate to be elected to high office without repeated assurances that his/her religious beliefs match those of the more vociferous believers in the constituency.

(c) "I enjoy expanding the minds of Saudis and hope they will make much needed changes in their country because of the things I have taught them" (P. 87) is simply breathtaking in its mindless condescension.

Yet none of these statements is evidence of linguistic imperialism. What we see here is, perhaps, pedagogic incompetence, or, let us hope, examples of highly unrepresentative ignorance. These are statements that result from the muddled thinking of two very stupid women, and their tenor is familiar to anyone who has spent any time on Dave's ESL Café, but such gormlessness is hardly the game-plan of a hegemonic military-political-educational alliance that aims to dominate the globe.

At the 2012 TESOL Arabia Conference, Asadi appeared to believe that because she had based much of her theory on Phillipson's work, then that work had a particular authority. This is a circular argument that leaves no room for Phillipson's critics – and those critics are now speaking more loudly than ever before (Saraceni 2008; King 2011; Waters 2013). In King's (2011; 285) terms, the postmodern theory of linguistic imperialism "sees the world in terms of power, victimhood, privilege, colonialism (of the Western sort, mainly, not so much that of the former Soviet Union or China), conspiracy (where others might find only muddle and stupidity), and above all, imperialism, which Phillipson detects at every bend in the road. The world of postmodernism is a world in which words have taken leave of their ordinary senses, as it were, their meanings drifting here, there, everywhere, until backwards reels the mind."

To demonstrate the truth of that last statement, let us look again at Asadi's informant's hope that the Saudis "will make much needed changes in their country because of the things I have taught them." What this woman obviously fails to realize is that she is working at an all-female university in Saudi Arabia precisely because there have already been quite staggering changes, and that those changes occurred, remarkably, without her help. Such changes, moreover, have affected the entire Arab Gulf. In his memoirs, the Emirati businessman Mohammed al Fahim comments, "Life in Abu Dhabi at the time of my birth was the same as it had been in 1800" (Al Fahim 2011; 32). Similarly, Khalfan al Habtoor, another Emirati businessman, and two years Al Fahim's junior, states that "It was 1949 when I emerged yelling into a world that no longer exists." (Al Habtoor 2012; blurb).

Holes (2009; 217) goes further:- "The rate of social and economic change in the Gulf in the last 50 years, and especially in the last 20, has been giddyingly fast, and certainly much faster than at any time previously. Before this sudden acceleration there seems to have been a long period of stability, one might almost say stagnation, in the way of life, no matter who occupied the seats of power. In a sense, when we talk about 50 years ago in the Gulf, we may as well be talking about 200 or 300 more years ago, so slow was the pace of change until recently."

Yet more evidence of change is offered in the careers of Salim bin Kabina and Salim bin Ghabaisha, and in this instance we have the pictures to prove it. Bin Kabina and Bin Ghabaisha were Wilfred Thesiger's companions on his epic journey from Salalah, through the Empty Quarter and down to what was then the Trucial Coast (Thesiger 1959). Thesiger employed them when they were impoverished 15 or 16 year-olds, at a time when they were already responsible for widowed mothers and younger

siblings, but owned only a rifle and the clothes that they wore. (Figure 1 and 2).

Figure 1 – Salim bin Kabina. Figure 2 – Salim bin Ghabaisha

By the time of their second series of journeys, both men were older, harder and tougher (Figure 3),

(Figure 3)

and after Thesiger left the Trucial Coast, Bin Ghabaisha transformed himself into a notorious raider (i.e. bandit) with a number of blood-feuds on his

hands. Thesiger feared for the future of both his companions, predicting that "economic forces beyond their control would eventually drive them into the towns to hang about street corners as 'unskilled labour'" (Thesiger 1959; 330).

In fact, he need not have been so concerned. Both men are still alive, and have transformed themselves again. They have now become living legends. The explorer and adventurer Adrian Hayes recently retraced Thesiger's route, with camels, though also with sat-nav, a camera crew and without the problems caused by internecine tribal warfare and blood-feuds (Hayes 2012). At the end of the journey, Bin Kabina and Bin Ghabaisha welcomed him at the city of Al Ain (Walsh 2013).

(Figure 4).

They are now the most respectable of gentlemen, both in their seventies, and the patriarchs of large and flourishing families, living in grace-and-favour villas gifted to them by the late Sheikh Zayed al Nahyan of Abu Dhabi.

The Emirati businessmen and the erstwhile raiders all exhibit what has been described as the Gulf Arabs' "power of accommodation" (Raban 1979; 154). The last third of the 20$^{th}$ century totally transformed their world, bringing unparalleled wealth to small communities in a very short time frame. Obviously, mistakes were made at both individual and government level, and these have been gleefully remarked by hostile critics, but on balance, the Gulf States have shown a remarkable ability to cope with change, meeting new ideas head-on, and filtering them through their shared heritage and culture.

Britain's decision to withdraw from East of Suez in 1971 (Cordesman 1977) marked a political turning point. Bahrain and Qatar opted for independence; the former Trucial States opted for federation and the establishment of the United Arab Emirates. At this juncture, Sheikh Zayed

demonstrated the personal tact and diplomatic skill that were required to co-ordinate the separate Emirates, allowing each the freedom to develop its own identity within the framework of a larger organization.

Even so, the current UAE is not without its critics. One instance here is Dr. Sally Feldman, sometime Dean of the School of Media, Art and Design at the University of Westminster, now Senior Fellow, Creative Industries, at the same institution. In 2005 Dr. Feldman went to Dubai looking for a repressive police state. Like Asadi's informants, she tailored her observations to fit her preconceptions. Among other things, she complains of the "silent, unsubtle presence of armed police" (Feldman 2006; 189); of the law against littering; of the fact that she was unable to buy a beer in a waterside café by the Dubai Creek, and because nobody tried to steal her mobile phone.

One wonders if Dr. Feldman has ever noticed the police pairings, armed and wearing flak jackets, who patrol at railway stations and airports in the United Kingdom; if she is unaware that anti-littering legislation exists in other countries, or if she has ever heard of licensing laws. If she is really so dependent on alcohol, she could have obtained it in any large hotel near the Dubai Creek. So far as her phone is concerned, moreover, surely a city that is almost free of street crime is to be applauded, rather than deplored as evidence of totalitarian control.

In Oman, His Majesty Sultan Qaboos became the only ruler in history to conduct a successful counter-insurgency against Marxist guerillas, and then proceeded to establish a welfare state that is now moving towards constitutional democracy. The government is determined to reduce its dependence on revenue from hydrocarbons and to that end has funded an extensive tourist infrastructure, including a Royal Opera House.

In Qatar, by contrast, Sheikh Hamed bin Khalifa al Thani staggered the Arab Gulf by being the first ruler in its history to voluntarily abdicate in favour of his son, Sheikh Tameem bin Hamed. Before that, Sheikh Hamed had overseen the construction of gleaming tower blocks, a Sports City, a highly successful national airline, and a broadcasting network based around Al Jazeera television (Emirates Centre for Strategic Studies and Research 1999). Al Jazeera has made its reputation by embracing investigative journalism, although it is true that it leaves Qatar alone (El Oifi; 2011.)

By any standards, these are impressive achievements, and they indicate that the Arab Gulf is now part of the globalised economy. Last year, the UAE Academic Jamal Al Suwaidi published a book entitled *From Tribe to Facebook* (Al Suwaidi 2013), whose title sums up this transformation. Until approximately 1970, the Arab Gulf states were backwaters, sitting on the edges of world affairs, but now they have moved to centre stage and have adopted English as their international, business language because, in

Babrakzai's (2004) phrase, "they want to compete with the Anglo world, rather than join it."

Linguistic Imperialism – yet again.

This ought to be a fairly simple point to understand, but it finds no favour with those who endorse Phillipson's (1992) theory of linguistic imperialism. This theory has most recently been criticized as "a ready-made sociopolitical template….superimposed onto ELT and the resulting picture unproblematically 'read-off'" (Waters 2013; 130), but it is still has the power to awaken white-liberal guilt. Following Gramsci's theory that conventional common sense is the hegemony of the ruling class, Phillipson offers the cake-and-eat-it argument that if English is imposed on a colonial dependency, then that is outright linguistic imperialism. If, by contrast, an independent country like Malaysia, having tried to limit the use of English in favour of the national language (Moh'd-Ashraf 2003; Tsui 2004), reverts to English in the interests of economic growth and social prosperity, then this, too, is linguistic imperialism – a sort of confidence trick played on the electorate by a corrupt government.

This is also the stance taken by Asadi (2013), who bases her argument on her own version of history. "English was introduced to Saudi Arabia in 1924 due to the presence of the British and American governments" (Asadi 2013; 83) is simply untrue. In 1924, there was no Saudi Arabia. In 1924, what is now Saudi Arabia was divided into the Sultanate of the Nejd, ruled by Abdulaziz ibn Saud, and the Kingdom of the Hejaz, ruled by Hussein bin Ali, formerly the Sharif of Mecca. Secondly, the first institution to teach English in the Kingdom was the Scholarship Preparation School (SPS), established in Mecca in 1936 (Al Ghamdi and Al Saadat 2002). Mahboob and Elyas (2014; 129), moreover, point out that "This *one* school (their emphasis) was only open to Saudis going abroad, and not to the other citizens", so it hardly constituted much of a cultural threat.

Asadi also grossly misinterprets recent educational developments in the Kingdom. Absurdly citing Biava (1995) she offers as evidence "Saudi Arabia's language planning objectives aim to increase English language instruction and reduce Arabic and Islam (sic) courses." (Pp. 83-84).

There are two points here. Firstly, Asadi appears to be unaware that the current educational policies are actually a triumph for Saudi Arabian parent power. In 2002, there was a fire at a girls' school in Mecca. Several girls died because the school was housed in a building that had never been designed to accommodate classrooms, and the fire doors were locked. It was also alleged that members of the Society for the Prevention of Vice and the Promotion of Virtue had hampered the relief efforts, because they feared that some of the girls might have been unveiled.

Following the fire, the Chairman of the Presidency for Female Education gave a press conference, at which he made the extraordinarily complacent statement that he was only answerable to the King, and that his job was safe. Within a week he had been dismissed, and responsibility for girls' education had been handed over to the Ministry of Education. At the same time, the Ministry was ordered to revise the entire education syllabus, reducing the number of hours spent on Islamic Studies and introducing English at Primary School level. This allowed critics like Al Brashi (2003) and Karmani (2005) to raise the inflammatory slogan of "more English, less Islam" but Mahboob and Elyas report that the reforms were probably long overdue. Before 2003, English was taught in schools for four 45 minute periods a week. Islamic studies were taught for four 45 minute periods a day.

It must also be stressed that the initiative for reform came from the then Crown Prince, now King, Abdullah himself (Lacey 2009; 238). They have nothing to do with Biava's arguments about Christian proselytizers; missionary activity remains illegal in the Kingdom. The King's initiatives are, however, indicative of an on-going struggle between the Saudi royal family and the religious authorities. The latter have opposed, at various times, telephones, radio, television, any form of female education, mobile phones with camera attachments, female athletes participating in the Olympics and women working in shops – any shops – including shops selling female lingerie in shopping malls that men are forbidden to enter. On every occasion, they have urged that these things are ***haram*** (forbidden by Islam – see Hudson 2013) but they have lost the battle on every point.

They have also lost the battle so far as English teaching is concerned. Asadi (2013; 84) cites the critics Kamzi (1997) and Karmadi (2005) but at the same time, she ignores research by Al Haq and Smadi (1996; 313) which concluded that in Saudi Arabia "learning English is neither an indication of westernization nor entails an imitation or admiration of Western cultural values."

Their research has since been endorsed by Congreve (2006) who concludes that while some Saudi Students have "a very positive attitude towards the utility of English" (P. 353), that attitude reflects a goal orientated, instrumental motivation, and as Gardner (2000; 10) points out "doesn't seem to involve any identification or feeling of closeness with the other language group." The reliability of those findings, of course, is proved by the fact that the Saudi elite (including senior religious figures) have always used private schools where their children are taught English.

This year, moreover, Mahboob and Elyas' (2014) study has demonstrated the extent to which both Islam and Saudi culture remain central to the teaching of English The 2007-2008 edition of *English for Saudi Arabia* includes units with titles like "Before Al Hajj", "The Early Spread of

Islam" and "Ramadhan", while "'Money', includes lessons on describng Saudi currency notes etc" (Mahboob and Elyas 2014; 138-139) and other units are about "Saudi Arabia yesterday and today" and "Arab aid".

Possibly even more importantly, Saudis now travel. As early as the mid-1970s, Raban refers to Saudi tourists in Amman in the most respectful terms:- "this modest, studious family with their passion for archeological sightseeing" (Raban 1979; 313) and intra-Gulf tourism now flourishes. The King Fahad Causeway linking Saudi Arabia to Bahrain is only 24 kilometres long. Special flights leave Riyadh for Salalah every August so that Saudi families can enjoy the pleasures of Dhofar's monsoon season. Dubai attracts shoppers and tourists in their thousands. Saudis have seen for themselves that other Gulf countries, where English has been introduced from Grade One of Primary School, have not collapsed into moral chaos.

**Conclusion**

This clearly demonstrates that "cultures ….are always meeting, touching and evolving, with associated implications for identity" (Mahrooqi and Roscoe 2012; 134). The religious authorities in Saudi Arabia have tried, harder than most, to keep contaminating influences out of the Kingdom. The rest of the Gulf, by contrast, has shown Raban's power of accommodation to a quite remarkable degree.

Saraceni (2008; 280) has indicated that Phillipson's conspiracy theory "involves a complete absence of conscious, intelligent and informed agency on the part of the stakeholders" while Mahmoud and Al-Mahrouqi (2012; 9) state that "In the Arab world, English is gaining ever more prominence as countries race to embrace modernity and economic development and become part of the modern world." Their choice of verb is interesting; "countries ***race***" (my emphasis), they are not driven. As Waters (2013; 129) indicates, English "is better seen as 'demand-driven', an expression of the desire by governments, corporations, agencies and individuals around the world to exploit the potential of English as 'linguistic capital' for their own ends. From this point of view, rather than viewed as an imposition, English is seen as an indispensable means of enabling those who acquire a knowledge of it to participate as fully as possible in global affairs."

If we accept this argument, then we must also accept that it is demeaning, patronizing, condescending and neo-colonialist to deny such agency to any group of people, and suggest that they really ought to remain true to their "traditional culture" – however defined - and reject English. Why should any educator abrogate to himself/herself the right to decide what is best for another people?

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