

Jews & Others in Iraq

SAMI ZUBAIDA

The history of the Jewish presence in Iraq is often forgotten, erased by mutually hostile nationalisms, Arabist and Zionist. A consideration of that history and of the embeddedness of the Jews in Iraqi society and culture presents an interesting reminder of the everyday cosmopolitanism that pervaded Iraqi urban (and some rural) society for much of the twentieth century. This everyday cosmopolitanism is here traced in various spheres and fields of general social life as well as professional activities. These relations across communal boundaries were subject to the impacts of the political and ideological episodes of the century: WWII, pan-Arab nationalism and pro-Nazi movements, the Communist movement and Jewish participation, and Zionism and the ultimate foundation of Israel.

Social mingling

With the foundation of the modern Iraqi state (British Mandate 1920; Independence 1932) Christian and Jewish individuals were well placed to participate in the emerging public life in government services, the professions, the arts, journalism, and business. Missionary schools and the Alliance Israelite Universelle established schools in Baghdad and other main cities in the course of the nineteenth century, educating their pupils in European languages and modern curricula. This participation led to the fostering of organic relations between individuals and families from different communities, in business and professional relations, friendships, and social mingling. Even in rural areas, Jewish doctors assumed vital roles in community life and service, and Jewish landlords, acquiring land after the Ottoman reforms of the nineteenth century, assumed paternal relations to their tenants and employees, to the extent of organizing Husseiniya ceremonies in the Shia mourning month of Muharram.

Women were often the most active and curious in social interactions of neighbourhood and female society. In oral accounts and written memoirs, the theme recurs of women moving easily between houses in mixed neighbourhoods, exchanging gossip and cooking recipes, as well as telling and commiserating over the many common matrimonial and domestic problems. They also participated in each other's festivities and occasions, exchanging greetings and items of food on their respective religious festivals of Eid, Purim, and Christmas. Jewish women in Shia neighbourhoods would sometimes join their neighbours on balconies and doorways to watch the mourning processions for the martyrs in Muharram. Women were also more receptive to religious intercession from whatever source to solve personal problems of fertility, health, wealth, and happiness. One such is the shrine of Shaykh Abdel-Qadir al-Gailani in Baghdad, known for its efficacy in solving problems of fertility, which was frequented by Jewish and Christian women.

Food constituted an interesting cultural field of interaction between individuals of different communities. The barriers of food taboos were transcended among friends, either by non-observance or by special provisions. From personal recollections, Muslim hosts would insure that their table included fish and vegetables for their Jewish guests who may observe Casher (Kosher) prohibitions, and Shia diners would ignore the taboo on commensality with non-Muslims observed in many Shia communities but ignored in mixed urban contexts. While most of the cuisine of each community represented variations on common themes of Middle East cooking, there were dishes specific to each, such as the Jewish Sabbath dish. In Baghdad this was a special chicken and rice dish cooked slowly overnight, known as *tebit*. Neighbours, attracted by the aromas, had their curiosity satisfied with sam-

The current image of Iraq in the media and public discourse is of a country sharply divided by communal boundaries and conflicts of religion, ethnicity, and community. This image goes right against any notion of "cosmopolitanism." Yet, research into the history of the country in the twentieth century would show that, while communal boundaries and conflicts did exist, these were socially permeable, allowing much close interaction between individuals, families, and neighbourhoods across the boundaries.

ple plates being sent between houses, often reciprocated by the recipient's typical food, or some sweets.

Music constituted another sphere of inter-communal mixing. Jews were particularly prominent in the musical arts from the nineteenth century, as instrumentalist, singers, composers, and cafe and cabaret owners. The Iraqi delegation to the Arab Music Congress in Cairo in 1932 consisted of Jewish instrumentalists and one Muslim singer. The first orchestra of Iraqi national

broadcasting in 1936 was predominantly Jewish. One of the most famous divas of the middle decades of the century was Salima Murad, a Jewess who converted to Islam to marry another famous singer, Nazim al-Ghazzali. Iraqi Jews in Israel have maintained their devotion to Iraqi music into the second and third generations, and Iraqi Jews in London import those musicians for their weddings and celebrations. I recall an occasion some years ago when a group of Iraqi Jewish musicians from Israel arriving in London to perform at a wedding were invited to the home of another Iraqi Jew for an evening with a prominent Muslim Iraqi musician who then lived in London. They were all friends in Baghdad in the old days, and it was an emotional reunion. They played and sang together well into the night.

Communal boundaries

The picture so far may appear a rosy one of friendly inter-communal interaction and cosmopolitanism. In fact most people, especially the poorer classes, were enveloped in their family and community lives, and the ritual calendar of their religion. Communal identities were never forgotten, and the boundaries may have been lowered for some, but never eliminated. Inter-marriage across religious boundaries was strictly taboo, and on the rare occasion on which it occurred (always the non-Muslim partner converting to Islam) was considered a great disaster for the families concerned. Boundaries are not necessarily locations of conflict, but they can become so when politicized, as they were in the course of the twentieth century. Arab nationalism, even when secular, drew heavily upon religious-communal sentiments. In this perspective Jews (and Christians) were associated with hostile colonial powers, and for Jews, the Zionist movement and Israel.

Iraqi politics under the Monarchy (displaced in 1958) consisted of various fronts of accommodation and opposition to a government close to British interests, and to the West in the Cold War. The ideological opposition was divided between the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP) and Arab nationalist groups. The Arab nationalists (in various parties, culminating in the Baath) tended to be recruited predominantly (though not exclusively) from Sunni Arabs. The ICP, which had solid popular constituencies, appealed to the whole spectrum of the Iraqi population: Arabs and Kurds, Sunna and Shia, Christians and Jews. Quite apart from its ideology and pro-Soviet allegiance, it was an "Iraqist" and cosmopolitan party. Jews, for the most part, avoided open involvement in politics where they were particularly vulnerable. But many young people, intellectuals, but also artisans, were attracted by the prospect of participation in a secular, universalist, and liberationist movement. Communist Jews, some of whom attained leadership positions, were to share in the sacrifices and persecutions of their comrades, and the political prisons became another arena of everyday cosmopolitanism.

Arab nationalist and Islamic sentiments and movements assumed markedly anti-Jewish positions and actions during the 1930s and 1940s, reinforced with the foundation of Israel in 1948. The 1936 Arab revolt in Palestine and the continuing confrontations with Jewish settlers there, led Arab nationalists to see all Jews as complicit. The Rashid Ali coup d'état in 1941 was anti-British and pro-Nazi, and though short-lived, presided over an intensification of anti-Jewish aggression, culminating in a "pogrom," known as the Farhud, targeting the Jews of Baghdad and some other cities, during which some 200 Jews were killed

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Everyday Cosmopolitanism

and many injured and raped; a traumatic event in collective Jewish memory. British forces soon re-occupied Baghdad and restored the Monarchy. During this episode many Jews were protected by their Muslim neighbours and friends, especially in the provinces, where a traditional sense of mutual obligations was particularly strong.

At the level of everyday relations ideological antipathies did not always inhibit friendships and associations. Nazi propaganda was prevalent in schools, especially espoused by Palestinian and Syrian teachers. A Jewish informant, who was at school in the late 1930s, relates walking hand in hand with his Muslim classmate in the street, the latter using the other hand to write on the wall with a piece of chalk "kill the Jews"! This same informant was in a political prison in the 1940s, as a communist, when a visiting high level medical inspector astonished the guards by stopping to greet him since they had been at school together.

Iraqi Jews had an ambivalent and shifting attitude to Zionism. Zionist emissaries sent into Iraq with the British forces during WW2 were disappointed with the apathy and even hostility of the local Jews, whom they decried in their reports as not proper Jews, integrated into "oriental" society, immersed in the pastimes and vices of their milieu: sitting around in cafes, drinking Arak, gossip, and gambling. Yet, as the Jews felt the increasing pressure and discrimination in the later 1940s, Israel and Zionism acquired greater attraction. For some, mostly young, the pull was ideological and attraction to the prospect of a western lifestyle and full citizenship. For others it was the push of persecution, loss of jobs, and arbitrary rule. In the end these pressures and attractions culminated in the emigration of the great majority of Jews, some 120,000, mostly to Israel in 1951, in accordance with a secret agreement between Iraqi leaders and the Jewish Agency which allowed Jews to leave without their possessions, on condition that they renounce their Iraqi nationality. A few thousands remained in Iraq, and some enjoyed a period of calm and prosperity in the years of the Qasim regime (1958–63), only to be subjected to further pressure under the Arabist and Baathist regimes of the 1960s, culminating in a wave of persecution and terror following the 1967 Arab defeat, then the Baathist coup of 1968 which brought Saddam and a bloodier regime to power. The bulk of the remaining Jews left as soon as they could after that.

Nation-state formation

Iraq is now seen as the epitome of violent sectarianism. A common assumption is that this state of affairs is in the nature of the country, being an "artificial" creation, forcing together diverse communities who cannot coalesce into a "nation." Most modern nations, however, started as artificial mixes, and it is the process of nation-state formation itself which creates various forms of the "national" at the socio-economic and cultural levels. Iraq was no exception. The account of "everyday cosmopolitanism" given here shows elements of this national formation and the lowering of communal barriers for much of the twentieth century, especially with regard to the ambiguous position of the Jews in relation to this "national." The present situation is the product of the disruptive processes unleashed by the Saddam regime, its extraordinary repressions and disastrous wars, and exacerbated by the American invasion of 2003.

It may be argued that, at the beginning of the twentieth century, Iraq was not unambiguously an "Arab country." Quite apart from the sizeable Kurdish population, the "Arab" component participated in a highly hybrid culture with echoes of the Turko-Iranic world. Nowruz, the spring festival of the Iranic world, was widely celebrated in many communities. Iraqi Arabic was, and remains to a certain extent, imbued with Persian and Turkish vocabulary. In the 1970s Saddam Hussein found it necessary to issue an order banning "foreign" words and expressions in Iraqi songs. It was the national state, Arab nationalist for the most part, which made Iraq into an "Arab country" in the course of the twentieth century. This project was also part of the mass national education, then government bureaucracy, all in standard Arabic. Yet, all these policies and processes never fully succeeded in eliminating the pervasive hybridity of Iraqi culture.

At the same time, the national state and its fields spawned orientations, spaces, and institutions for the flourishing of a different kind of cosmopolitanism, that of the intelligentsia and the educated middle



PHOTO BY AWAD AWAD / © AFP, 2003

**Jewish man
outside
Baghdad
synagogue**

classes. In these milieus, communal boundaries were lowered, and common mixing, friendships and partnerships flourished for much of the twentieth century. Yet, it was those cosmopolitan middle classes who fell victim to repeated campaigns of repression and expulsion. First, the Jews, who constituted a considerable tranche of the educated, professional, and business classes, were forced to leave. Then, during the 1970s and 80s, many Shia communities were subject to disappropriation and expulsion by the Saddam regime. Waves of political repression and persecution decimated the ranks of the intelligentsia, many killed and others in prison and exile. Repeated wars and devastation, followed by the UN sanctions, led to the impoverishment and humiliation of those classes and heightened pressures which drove many into exile.

The violence and disorder which followed the 2003 invasion included campaigns of assassination and kidnapping targeting professionals, including doctors, scientists, and professors, leading to a mass flight of these classes into exile. Iraq, then, has been largely denuded of the main carriers of everyday, as well as cultural, cosmopolitanism. The raging communal violence has also led to the ethnic cleansing of neighbourhoods, leading to greater homogeneity, and the erection of communal barriers, sometimes physically in the form of walls of separation. Christians, and other religious minorities have been particularly targeted and many driven into exile or internal displacement. What remains of Iraqi cosmopolitanism may now be found in London or Paris, and possibly Amman.

As for the cosmopolitanism of the Middle East more generally, can we see a waning of the ethnic and communal interactions of the earlier twentieth century? Certainly, the convergence of nationalism with Islamism which seems to prevail increasingly in many countries has led to a homogenization of populations and regions, and accelerated migrations of religious minorities to the West, after the almost complete ending of the Jewish presence in the region outside of Israel. What of globalization: does it lead to a new cosmopolitanism, or to added barriers generated by sharpened transnationalist and religious ideologies?

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Rediscovering Istanbul's Cosmopolitan Past

FLORIAN RIEDLER

In attempts to market their capital, Turkey's political and business elites present Istanbul as cosmopolitan, and welcoming in outsiders as managers of global corporations or simply as tourists. Yet before the 1990s, when the Turkish public began to rediscover and reevaluate its rich multicultural history, Istanbul's now much vaunted cosmopolitanism was all but forgotten. Among the many publications to nourish its rediscovery are the memoirs of the Turkish-Armenian author Hagop Mintzuri. His last work, *Istanbul Memories*, presents a firsthand

account of the author's life in Istanbul, where he arrived as boy when the city was still the Ottoman capital.¹ It was Mintzuri's first book to be accepted by a mainstream Turkish publishing house, though it was only published in 1993, some fifteen years after his death. *Istanbul Memories* consists of a series of articles, previously published individually in the 1970's by a small Armenian newspaper based in Istanbul. Only when these articles were translated from Armenian into Turkish, and then gathered in book form, did the public gain access to Mintzuri's unusual and valuable recollections of the city. While the book serves as a timely reminder of the tragic loss of diversity suffered by Istanbul during the first half of the twentieth century, its recent publication is ample proof of the current desire to resurrect the idea of Istanbul as a historically, and thus somehow intrinsically, cosmopolitan setting.

To the modern reader, *Istanbul Memories* presents a lively and colourful picture of the Ottoman capital around the year 1900. Mintzuri moved there, at age twelve, from a village in Eastern Anatolia to work alongside his father, grandfather, and uncles in the bakery the family had leased. They belonged to thousands of poor villagers – among them Albanians, Greeks, Turks, Kurds, and Armenians – who had migrated to the Ottoman capital to earn a living. As seen through the eyes of a boy from the countryside, the city was full of new, strange, and exciting things: the sultan's palaces, trams, cafes and beer-gardens, department stores, and book shops. At the same time, the book portrays the intimate social relationships of the immigrant craftsmen, shop owners, and workers with whom Mintzuri lived and worked. According to Mintzuri, regardless of their origins, these workers treated each other with respect and cordiality.

In the nostalgic reminiscences of an old man, the rising ethnic tensions and intercommunal violence that characterized the late Ottoman era of his youth play no part. Mintzuri could ignore these tensions, because, like other Mediterranean port cities of the day, late Ottoman Istanbul seemed like an unusually peaceful place if one were to consider the violence of the transitions ahead (as Turkey was recreated from the debris of the Ottoman Empire as a national state). Writing in the 1970s, Mintzuri had seen his once famously diverse capital turn its back on this diversity. This process was drawn out over a period of almost half a century.

While Mintzuri's nostalgic accounts of Ottoman cosmopolitanism mesh perfectly with recent social and economic trends, the book lays bare certain contradictions between contemporary and past discourses regarding the realities of cosmopolitanism in Istanbul. One of the most pertinent of these contradictions concerns the often troubled relationship between diversity and migration.

The image of Istanbul as capital of one of the world's greatest empires is often used to emphasize its cosmopolitanism, a convenient marketing tool in today's global economy. Just as historical monuments are used to remind the tourist of Istanbul's role as the cradle of civilization, the claim to cosmopolitanism employs the notion that, in Ottoman times, many religious and ethnic groups coexisted peacefully in the city. Yet in repackaging Istanbul in this way, certain signs of diversity are championed while others are notably passed over.

Marginalization

During and immediately after the First World War, when it was occupied by the Entente, Istanbul remained a shelter for an Ottoman world soon to be demolished by the emerging forces of national Turkey. Mintzuri himself survived in Istanbul and was spared the deportation and murder that befell his family and the Armenian community of his village in Anatolia. In his own words, it was these events that first compelled him to write about his home and people.

In the early years of the Turkish Republic, the city went through a process that may only be described as paradoxical. On the one hand, the government settled in Istanbul those non-Muslims it thought would not integrate well into the new Turkish nation, the numbers of Greek, Armenian, and Jewish inhabitants of Istanbul swelling as a result. At the same time, however, a process was set in motion by which the same incomers were gradually rendered socially invisible. During the 1920's and 30's, the new regime followed a policy of cultural homogenization. Language and dress of all its inhabitants were to be uniform, at least in public. Large sectors of the different minority communities agreed to, and even supported this policy. In their view, cultural Turkification was the price they must pay to become equal citizens of the new nation.

The government's promise of equality was not kept, however. Legal discrimination of minorities remained widespread and led to the emigration of many individuals. Eager to sponsor a new Turkish class of entrepreneurs, the state subjected all minority communities to economic marginalization. In 1942, this trend peaked with the so-called Wealth Tax (*Varlık Vergisi*), which ruined the livelihoods of these communities' businessmen and small craftsmen.² Worse was yet to come, the pogrom of 6 and 7 September 1955, against the city's Greek Orthodox community, marked the deathblow of communal diversity in Istanbul. Following conflicts over Cyprus, a mob supported by the government destroyed Greek property and churches. Almost all Istanbul Greeks left the city as a result.

Revaluation of the cosmopolitan past

Among both academics and members of Turkey's general public, this period of Turkish history only began to be reconsidered in the 1990's. A new generation of critical historians began to call into question the official silence surrounding the state's treatment of non-Muslim minorities. For the first time, issues like the Wealth Tax and the anti-Greek pogroms of 1955 were examined from a non-nationalist perspective.

In contrast, Ottoman history offered the example of a seemingly more tolerant treatment of the city's minorities and peaceful co-existence of all its inhabitants. Outside academia, the reawakened interest in Ottoman Istanbul concentrated on the city's belle époque at the turn of the twentieth century. The public was particularly drawn to the Europeanized urban culture of Pera (today's Beyoğlu, a quarter north of the Golden Horn) with its cafés, theatres, casinos, hotels, and embassies. The popular imagination was stoked by tourism and media campaigns involving Istanbul's nineteenth century architecture and black and white photos of its once sophisticated denizens. It was not long before these images became marketable: Beyoğlu's nineteenth-century areas have been renovated and fitted with cafes, restaurants, and a luxury shopping mall. Property prices have risen as a result. In quarters originally fashionable among artists and intellectuals for their multiculturalism, nineteenth century architecture has become an asset on the private property market. Likewise, shopping malls, cafes, res-

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Hagop Mintzuri

PHOTO BY ARA GÜLER

and daughters of rich Armenian traders and Turkish officials at school. Yet, Mintzuri never belongs to their world; he is always excluded on the basis of class and income. Throughout his life, and particularly during Republican times, Mintzuri must struggle to make ends meet (though never explicitly stated, this is presumably due to the economic policies of the time). The author's penury, his feelings of alienation and distress after losing his home and family contribute to the intimacy of his work.

Istanbul Memories represents the voice of poor peasants migrating to Istanbul. It recaptures a past that has all but disappeared from the public memory, which retraces migration patterns back no further than the 1950's. Mintzuri's life story is a reminder that Istanbul's diversity was created by migrants, in Ottoman times as well as today. Despite the popularity of the aforementioned claim to cosmopolitanism, Istanbul's middle classes have not always been as welcoming to outsiders as is now implied. By the 1950s, almost all of Istanbul's non-Turkish communities of Jews, Armenians, and Greeks had left the country under pressure from the nationalist government. They were supplanted by an influx of Anatolian migrants, predominantly from Central Anatolia and the Black Sea coast, among these Alevis and Lazes. Raising its population from one to more than five million in 1980, and thus rendering the city overwhelmingly Turkish and Muslim, these new arrivals struggled to integrate into modern Istanbul. Rather, they were accused of lowering standards of "civilization," and of destroying civic culture and the urban environment with their shantytowns. Migration became a scapegoat for any number of problems, from land speculation to political nepotism. In public memory Anatolian migrants even stand accused of being responsible for the 1955 pogrom.⁴ This is not altogether surprising, it is true for example that, among the shock troops that plundered Greek property, beat up its owners, and torched churches,

there were many Anatolians, some bussed in for the occasion. Newcomers to the city were the natural political clientele of the Democratic Party, which organized the riots against the Greeks of Istanbul. Nevertheless, the claim that it was only the migrants that were responsible for the pogrom's atrocities is unreasonable; without the help of the local authorities and inhabitants such violence would simply not have been possible.

Ultimately, despite modern claims to cosmopolitanism, the arrival of migrants has rarely been welcomed by Istanbul's established population. The injustice of this attitude is worth noting. For, despite the levels of prejudice, the new waves of Anatolian migrants have managed to establish themselves in Istanbul and, in so doing, have returned to the city much of its historically diverse flavour. Moreover, with the economic opening of Turkey in the 1980's and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, still more immigrant communities have started to settle in the city. During the 1990's, the war against the PKK in Turkey's South East also brought in Kurdish refugees. As their numbers soar, the migrant communities increasingly assert their political, religious, and cultural identities. As these displays meet with the global (consumer) culture associated with new businesses and visiting tourists, a peculiarly modern form of multiculturalism, a hybrid of past and present, is developing.⁵ More than a hundred years after Hagop Mintzuri first arrived in the city, Istanbul's cosmopolitanism has been revived conceptually, through a nostalgic appeal to its Ottoman past, and practically, through the arrival of vast numbers of migrants from other areas in Turkey and beyond. As a result, Mintzuri's childhood vision of Istanbul, as a diverse and booming metropole, begins once again to ring true.

taurants, and pubs in the inner city entertainment district of Beyoğlu have increasingly used its nineteenth century architecture as a stage for consumerism.³

This repackaging of Pera/Beyoğlu, as a cosmopolitan locale *par excellence*, is particularly important because of its resonance with contemporary struggles over Turkish identity. To the city's modern middle classes, the area stands as a symbol of urbanity and sophistication, rooted in a history that is European, modern, and "civilized." Equally, this picture accords with a determinedly secularist vision of the city as a whole. A contrasting view became politically relevant in 1994, however, when the Islamist Welfare Party won the local elections for the first time. To these Islamist politicians, Pera/Beyoğlu's Europeanized multiculturalism carries profoundly negative connotations, ones that speak predominantly of cultural alienation and loss of traditions.

The translation and publication of *Istanbul Memories* must be considered in light of the ongoing reappraisal of Istanbul's cosmopolitan past. At first glance, Mintzuri's nostalgic recollections of turn of the century Istanbul, penned by a member of one of its minority communities, connects very well to the popular imagination today. Old photographs, provided by the publisher, add to its appeal. However, the book has more to offer than the usual clichés on cosmopolitanism. For, Mintzuri's deeply personal eye-witness account of a once multicultural and peaceful Istanbul, prior to the advent of nationalism, is free from the political agenda that so distorted the image of Ottoman cosmopolitanism in later times.

Migrants transforming the city

Mintzuri does not merely present nostalgic visions of Istanbul's cosmopolitan past. He also points to stories of migration which, though easily forgotten by inhabitants of Istanbul with a dislike of "outsiders," remain very much part of the city's character. *Istanbul Memories* was written by a rural migrant, and thus a social underdog. Given this fact, it is not surprising that the themes of poverty and exclusion are here ubiquitous. On first arriving in Istanbul, the author has to buy new clothes and lose his accent so as not to stand out. He lives in a world very different from belle époque Pera, though no less multicultural and diverse. Indeed, in his account, these two worlds sometimes meet. For instance, when he ventures into Pera or sits side by side with the sons

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Notes

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Dubai What Cosmopolitan City?

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For much of its recorded history, Dubai has been recognized as a cosmopolitan city. Sixty years ago, the late traveller and photographer Wilfred Thesiger remarked that Dubai's suqs were "crowded with many races," including Arab townsmen, Beduins, slaves, Baluchis, Persians, Indians, Kashgai tribesmen, and Somalis.¹ The Dubai of today is a far cry from that of the mid-twentieth century. The city has been totally transformed into a gigantic metropolis, growing at breathtaking speed and attracting a deluge of guest workers, investors, and tourists from around the world.

The unprecedented growth of Dubai would have been impossible without foreign labour. Reliable numbers are hard to come by, but most sources estimate that expatriates from around the globe now account for more than ninety percent of the city residents, dwarfing the local Emiratis to a small minority. As the city grows, its cosmopolitan nature expands and intensifies reflected in such areas as dress, food, language, religion, and other aspects of lifestyle filtering through everyday life.

However, Dubai often finds itself caught between its carefully crafted and branded image as a city of harmonious living and a global hub of business and tourism, and its reputation as a harshly segregated city living off the indentured labour of exploited Asian workers. These perceptions have generated a lively debate about the nature of the Dubai experiment and attracted both praise and condemnation. For many, Dubai is a success story, regardless of the reasons and costs. The city's openness for example to bold ideas in designing urban spaces is seen by some as an indicator of Dubai's unique place as "the prototype of the 21st century," making it into a designer's paradise.² Others however dismiss Dubai as an unsustainable experiment of a vast gated community, rooted in mindless consumption and economic injustice.³

Much of the unsympathetic views about Dubai seems to emanate from a preconceived rejection of capitalist consumerism. But to see Dubai through this prism only is problematic and ill-informed. It is a gross simplification to describe Dubai as a gated community. The relative freedom of movement within the city and the millions of visitors and newly-recruited workers constantly streaming into it are hardly signs of a gated city. It would be more accurate to say that Dubai is a generally open city-state of relatively gated communities. Similarly, it is hard to believe that Dubai is a mirage. The city has been around for longer than many western cities; and its growth, regardless of how it is characterized should not render it less real than Monte Carlo, Las Vegas, or Singapore.

The social architecture of Dubai is premised on a sharp division and separation of the main three communities: local Emiratis, western, Arab and subcontinental expatriates, and South Asian workers. These communities are generally differentiated by their civic rights, socio-economic status, residential location, lifestyle priorities, and cultural identities. Some of the spheres of separation are the result of the kinds of jobs people have and how much money they earn; others exist by virtue of the natural gravitation of different groups of people towards communities and localities that reflect their national or cultural identity. Consequently, these groups enjoy different sets of choices and freedoms.

Citizens

At the top of the social pyramid is the national Emirati community, also known as the nationals or the locals. Statistically, this is a shrinking minority, comprising no more than ten percent of Dubai's inhabitants; it is also the only group that enjoys the UAE citizenship with all the

Dubai's phenomenal development is celebrated by some as a model of cosmopolitan living, and downplayed by others as a non-sustainable urbanism rooted in exploitation. Whatever the truth is, the mix of peoples and lifestyles in Dubai is remarkable, as expatriates from all over the world move there to live and work. Yet this cosmopolitanism is tempered by dynamics of segregation and the exclusion of the majority expatriate population from civic life. This article examines these conflicting faces of cosmopolitan living in Dubai.

rights and privileges that come with it, including substantial governmental subsidies and a distinct preferential treatment. Most Emiratis live in separate or detached houses, usually up-scale walled villas, in neighbourhoods where similar Emirati families find living more comfortable; for example certain parts of Jumeira, Um Suqeim, and Garhoud. Though occasionally expatriate families may live nearby, even next door, meaningful interaction between locals and foreigners is extremely lim-

ited and often nonexistent. However, the mutual need and routine interaction can promote shared interests and also create mutual respect, understanding, acceptance, and sometimes, even friendship.

Increasing numbers of Emiratis for example are sending their children to private schools where they will have an opportunity for daily interaction with other children and teens from around the world. These young Emiratis are full participants in the kind of multi-cultural experience that is virtually impossible in the regular public schools system, where students are exclusively nationals (occasionally mixed with a limited number of children of Arab expatriates). Other areas of interaction include higher education and private sector employment. Many young Emiratis, including women, attend colleges and universities, some of which are open to all students, with western curricula, and a multi-national staff and faculty teaching in English. Once graduated, many of these Emiratis choose to work in private businesses, where, unlike working in the government sector, they get to intermingle daily with colleagues and customers from around the globe.

These changes in education and employment are increasing the chances of breaking the divide between the national and expatriate communities. To some degree, this trend is the result of the policy of "emiratization," whereby private businesses in some sectors (such as banking and financial services) are encouraged through incentives (or required by law) to hire local citizens in specific jobs. This process is also driven by a growing sense of frustration among many locals that their country is practically being run at many levels by expatriate managers and workers. The sharp increase in the cost of living in Dubai has also pushed a significant number of Emirati families into a position of greater financial need. Thus more nationals are now actively seeking private employment.

But despite these profound changes, the majority of the working nationals are absorbed into government and public sectors, if they do not own or co-own their own businesses. This is understandable, given the work environment in this sector and the governmental policy of comprehensive subsidies for its employees. Very few private employers are willing to pay the kinds of salaries and benefits afforded to locals in the public sector, assuming they are eligible to work there in the first place. While some governmental sectors have been almost completely nationalized, with most employment (save for service jobs and manual labour) in the hands of Emiratis, other ones, such as education, are still heavily dependent on expatriates. If anything, the need for larger influxes of expatriate labour is all the more urgent as the city grows exponentially and the government has a hard time filling in the expanding job market with trained nationals.

Some of the more interesting daily cosmopolitan experiences happen in the old Dubai, namely, Deira and Bur Dubai, home to some of the poorest of the nationals and long-term residents; mostly people who came to the city generations ago from other parts of Arabia, Iran, or South Asia and continued to live in Dubai without necessarily becoming fully naturalized. This area is also a favorite for transient expa-

triatees with modest income to live and do business. The old city is spatially delineated from its later extensions and other newer neighbourhoods (such as Garhoud, Jumeira, and Mir-dif) where wealthier nationals and comfortable expatriates tend to live. It is also worlds apart from the new Dubai, which is an amalgam of high rises and suburbia with luxury villas and modern apartments, rented or owned by mostly rich and middle class expatriates. Old Dubai is also popular with tourists seeking the experience of the ambience of Dubai as an Oriental city. As a result, this part of Dubai is a thriving cosmopolitan site. There is a much more frequent and genuine interaction among people living there. These localities, for example Ghbeiba and Satwa, have a clear transnational connection evident in the languages spoken, the signs posted, the ethnic restaurants, the many money-exchange and transfer offices, and the games or sports played there.⁴

Expatriates

The bulk of the expatriate population resides in districts outside the old city and in the new Dubai, often described as pretentious, lifeless, and bland cookie-cutter urban spaces. This is partially true, though it tends to romanticize old Dubai and exaggerate the fake urbanism of the new one. The new Dubai communities may have little to show in terms of lively social and cultural activities; but those who live there are real people who come from all over the world, often with families, to make a living. They often live in gated or semi-gated communities, either in small walled compounds or mega developments, and without a clear national or ethnic pattern of residency. The daily interaction of this multi-national and transient population, via neighbourly relations or encounters at clubs, schools, pools, parks, and gyms, contributes to a growing sense of a harmonious cosmopolitan living.

Most recently, those with more invested interest in these communities, such as the long-term expatriate tenants and owners of apartments and townhouses, have started to bind together to improve living conditions for them and their families through initiatives such as recycling programmes, committees tackling pressing issues, beach and desert cleaning campaigns, charity drives, and sports activities. What many of these people have in common, as neighbours, tenants, owners, and parents, is more than just accidentally sharing a space; they also share a growing sense of common interest that opens channels of communication and interaction. Such experiences cannot be dismissed as meaningless.

In addition to social contacts in villa compounds and apartment buildings, other private and public places can be identified as cosmopolitan sites. These include businesses, government offices serving and tending to the needs of expatriates (police stations, immigration and naturalization, municipality), and public places such as shopping malls, clubs, bars, parks, and beaches. Shopping is perhaps the most frequent public activity for many of the Dubai international population. The mix of people, styles, shops, goods, foods, and entertainment facilities and activities in almost all of the city's mega malls is remarkable. While the shopping mall is by definition a shallow and passing experience, in contrast private schools offer the most significant public space for cosmopolitan encounters in Dubai. The bonds of friendship and everyday living created between students (as well as teachers and staff) of these schools is one of the most enduring legacies of cosmopolitan Dubai.

Asian labourers

Asian labourers constitute the largest group of expatriates, but also are the most excluded from the cosmopolitan experience of Dubai. This is the class at the very bottom of the social pyramid and the most invisible and secluded in terms of residence and social life. The bulk of workers live in labour camps, often in squalid living conditions and far away from other residential areas. But this situation is also gradually changing: first, the national and ethnic mix of the labourers themselves is expanding, as Asian workers from more countries, such as China, join the labour force; second, the distance between labour camps and the built up residential and commercial areas is fast disappearing. Now more workers can be seen wandering in shopping malls or walking around residential districts. Living without their families (since they do not earn enough to do that), the workers' everyday life



PHOTO BY MOHAMMAD MASAD, 2008

revolves around work and survival, with little emotional solace or escape. This is still largely an excluded class, where workers have little contact with others outside of their coworkers and superiors.

Other groups of urban nomads are mostly in a better position to nurture transnational identities. For them, the feeling of an outsider is never gone, but the lack of strong or irreplaceable affiliations and belonging combined with an extended residency in the city highlight a sense of connection to Dubai and what it has to offer. The securities of work, good life, harmonious living, safe city, and modern facilities cannot be underestimated, and to the extent Dubai can offer these the bond between city and inhabitants can only get stronger.

Transnational utopia?

Dubai is definitely not a utopia, though it has at its disposal an endless capacity to accommodate everything and anything. The temporariness of most of its inhabitants and the lack of equality in terms of citizenship and residency rights are two conditions that deepen the separation and give rise to tension. To make Dubai a truly modern city that cares for all of its residents and its future, the city has to overcome the root causes that continue to tarnish its reputation. Among these, the severe segregation of its communities, the sub-human conditions of Asian labourers, and the lack of civil society are among the most urgent. Sorting out these problems will propel the rise of an urban cosmopolitan existence that is much more humane and sustainable.

Dubai may not be the ultimate cosmopolitan city, but it can rightfully claim to be more cosmopolitan than other cities in the region. In addition to its history of multi-ethnic living and openness, it is certainly not lacking in diversity, resources, boldness, and fame to make cosmopolitan living much more than a touristic promotion or a skin-deep phenomenon. There is recently some movement in this direction, most notably the changes in property ownership laws, enacted five years ago. These changes create the prospect of a long-term or permanent residency, often in the same buildings or projects, of many thousands of people from around the globe who are seeking property investment or a well-paying job with a modern lifestyle in Dubai. Though extending citizenship to non-Emiratis will probably not be on the horizon for a long time (the country has yet to find closure on the problem of the *bidoun*, stateless people who claim to be Emiratis but haven't been considered citizens), progress on advancing civic rights, and creating a more equitable system can significantly change social dynamics. How far these changes can go is difficult to ascertain at the moment, but in the meanwhile, more and more people seem to be willing to think of Dubai as a home city and identify with what it represents.

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Shoppers in Dubai's Mall of the Emirates

Notes

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Staging Cosmopolitanism

MAURIZIO ALBAHARI

Artistic festivals featuring a diverse array of exhibits, concerts, cuisine, and dances are fortunately a well-attended feature of European public spaces. They are sponsored, under the agenda of intercultural and interreligious dialogue, by NGOs, religious organizations, corporations, counties, and cities, often through EU and UNESCO funds. The European Commission solemnly declared 2008 the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue, clearly supporting such programmes. In this sense, dialogue and cosmopolitanism are increasingly becoming a focus of public policy, despite central governments' burgeoning stinginess. In the following paragraphs I analyze the performing arts – means of expression and communication – in their potential to exemplify and promote forms of cosmopolitanism and dialogue. After providing examples of cosmopolitan efforts on Italian stages, I point out some of the potential pitfalls of the practices and rhetorics of staged, engineered dialogue and cosmopolitanism. I am especially critical of the accompanying Euro-centrism and ethno-religious essentialism, while proposing a more experiential and wide-reaching cosmopolitan agenda.

Performing cosmopolitanism

Working and rehearsing toward common goals, artists create friendships, knowledge, and contingent alliances. In this sense, artistic projects do not produce merely art and fruition, but new social relations as well. In addition, the performing arts might explicitly make of multiculturalism, peace, and social justice their own agenda, on and off stage. Astràgali Teatro, for example, is a theatre company founded in 1981 in Lecce, southern Italy, and supported by the Ministry of Culture as an innovative company. Featuring an extremely diverse crew, and touring around the Mediterranean, Astràgali is also a member of the Anna Lindh Euro-Mediterranean Foundation for the Dialogue between Cultures. Teatro di Nascosto, in Tuscany, draws directly on migrant and refugee experience, and works with Amnesty International and professionally trained refugee actors. In *Maschere Nere*, a theatre company in Milan, Senegalese, and Italians synthesize respective music and lyrics and perform scripts directly tackling immigration.

A very popular example of multicultural music is *Radiodervish*, an ensemble constituted in 1997 by Nabil Salameh, a native of Palestine, and southern Italian Michele Lobaccaro. Many of the songs are multilingual – featuring Italian, Arabic, English, and French – and have been intended by the ensemble “as small laboratories where passages unveil themselves between East and West and between the symbols and myths of the Mediterranean, a border place that unites in the very moment it separates.”¹ *Radiodervish* has recently toured a new poetry and music show, *Amara Terra Mia* (Bitter Land of Mine). Now also on CD, it is meant to narrate the precariousness of contemporary migrant experiences in both the region of origin and destination, and puts forwards an open call to peace and interreligious understanding. In its title and substance, *Amara Terra Mia* references the 1973 song by “Mr Volare” Domenico Modugno, in which the popular singer evoked the bitterness of southern Italian emigrants. *Radiodervish's* show debuted on 31 March 2006 in Tricase, a small southern Italian town. The spartan scenery was limited to a dozen thin light poles, tenuously evoking migrants' boats in the pitch-dark Mediterranean. Many in the audience appreciated the ensemble's frank approach and its whispered reflections on migration, pain, terror, dialogue, and cosmopolitanism in times of alleged cultural clash. The show received a five-minute standing ovation by an audience initially prone to scepticism.

Radiodervish also performed the night of 24 December 2007, in the public square of Bethlehem, as part of *Rassegna Negroamaro*, an annual travelling festival funded by the District of Lecce in southern Italy, which also sponsored the Italian tour of Palestinian musicians. And *Radiodervish's* frequent Italian performances with Noa, the American-Israeli singer, are routinely reported as an eminent example of inter-

Intercultural dialogue and cosmopolitanism are increasingly becoming a public policy focus. Art festivals, concerts, and a variety of public events explicitly promoting such agenda have been flourishing in southern European countries of recent immigration. Drawing on the Italian case, the author explores the performing arts' cosmopolitan potential, asking how hierarchies are challenged and recreated when majorities request minorities to engage in cosmopolitan dialogue, on and off stage.

religious dialogue and peace building. Whether these performers are truly enjoying their own cosmopolitan experience is of limited interest to us. In any event, what they do and sing on stage is understood as such by institutional sponsors and by many in the audience. In particular, it demystifies in practice pundits' loud belief in conflict as the necessary point of arrival of cultural and religious diversity.

Between cosmopolitanism and ethno-religious labels

Artists, and migrant artists in particular, face distinctive socio-economic and legal challenges, exemplified in the routine struggle with the unforgiving machinery of travel, residence, and work permits. And yet it is obviously their ethnic, religious, and cultural membership that is in the spotlight. Noa becomes “the Jewish artist”; Nabil the “Muslim poet”; and Boban “the Gypsy trumpeter.” One of the drawbacks of the uncritical celebration of the performing arts as automatically constituting dialogue and cosmopolitanism is precisely that socio-economic conditions and legal, political, and gender issues tend to disappear under the ethno-cultural or religious label on stage.

More generally, in intercultural practices in the performing arts, as elsewhere, there is often a problem of ascribed identities, and in particular of ascribed single identities reflecting the world division in supposedly mutually exclusive nation-states, belongings, and religions. Complex, cosmopolitan life trajectories are usually reduced to one and only one cultural membership on the basis of name, place of birth, and performed music genre. In this sense, many artists face a double bind: on the one hand, they understandably need to play by the market rules of funding, diversity, roots, and multiculturalism by performing on stage their postulated identity and representing whole ethnicities, continents, and even religions – Latin America, Judaism, the Middle East, and so forth. On the other, they refuse the captivity of simple labels, and emphasize their professional and political memberships as well.

A related problem specific to the performing arts is the exoticism ascribed to both the performers and their art, often defined as “ethnic.” The ethnic categorization marks everything that seemingly does not fully belong, or belong anymore, to the mainstream of western European nation-states. Thus, the artist filling the slot of the cultural and ethnic “Other” often experiences asymmetry and inequality with her unmarked peers. Roma musicians from south-eastern Europe, in particular, are acclaimed as showcasing seemingly distant and nowadays lost vitality, passion, and melancholia. They are made to fit a superficial representation of otherness, stereotypically appealing as distant in time and space. But Roma performances – while hyperbolically stemming from weddings, dances, and religious rituals – offer a masterful cultural event quite disengaged from its original social context. They do not offer an exotic peek into Roma everyday life. In short, the artist's life offstage might very well be as anaemic, mainstream, and mundane as that of the audience and of other classically trained musicians. Life off stage might also bear pervasive discrimination, including mobs torching Roma camps.

Thus, multicultural and otherwise “diverse” festivals in Europe can strengthen the somewhat misleading impression of living in fairly inclusive societies. Simplistic emphasis on cultural and ethno-religious membership reinforces the classical liberal view of the public sphere as a genderless and classless arena of unrestricted multicultural encounter. In practice, it is worth examining whether the performance of dialogue and cosmopolitanism obliterates the death, detention, and deportation increasingly faced by many other agents of “diversity” and “cultural difference,” such as migrants and asylum seekers, and the religious and socio-economic marginalization faced by others.

Finally, the rhetoric of intercultural and interreligious dialogue as currently phrased by many governments and organizations can take place only because salient differences have been established in the first place. What lies on the southern and eastern side of the Mediterranean – what

Everyday Cosmopolitanism



PHOTO BY MAURIZIO ALBAHARI, 2008

**Radiodervish
at a festival in
Melpignano,
Italy**

is usually lumped together as “the Balkans” and “the Middle East” – is often stereotypically relegated to a condition of backwardness and archetypal violence. It is worth examining whether by inviting “other” peoples, religions, and areas of the world to participate in dialogue, Italian and EU authorities morally legitimize their position as tolerant members of western civilization exempt from self-examination. In summary, whether existing international and interreligious asymmetries of power and hierarchy are challenged or reinforced needs to be asked for each specific exchange programme, invitation to dialogue, and cosmopolitan policy agenda.

World music? Neighbourhood music

“Intercultural dialogue” increasingly carries the unintended assumption that diversity needs to be artfully managed, convened, and sponsored. Hence, the question needs to be empirically investigated, whether socially and institutionally engineered cosmopolitan practices and discourses, including in the arts, paradoxically obliterate the unadvertised, everyday communal lives of large and small towns where migrants settle?

Radiodervish, *Teatro di Nascosto*, *Astràgali* and other such formations in Europe do not embody anything extraordinary or exceptional. *Radiodervish* members got acquainted as fellow college students in Bari, southern Italy. Even the now celebrated *Orchestra di Piazza Vittorio* – featuring musicians and composers from Argentina, Brazil, Cuba, Ecuador, Hungary, India, Italy, Senegal, Tunisia, and the US – is the selected offspring of the everyday diversity of Rome neighbourhoods. It emerged around the desire to raise funds and renovate a Rome theatre venue, rescuing it from its fate as a bingo hall. This does not suggest that the Orchestra was not in need of funding, interpersonal negotiation, rehearsal space, and even intercultural dialogue within itself in order to become an ensemble, rather than a dozen individual musicians on stage. The world fusion music performed by the Orchestra becomes a metaphor of the actual ensemble, where each person, by participating into a larger dialogical project, has to negotiate facets of musicianship, behaviour, and everyday practice – from being on time for rehearsals, to learning a song in Italian, Hindi, or Arabic, to rearranging a traditional Tunisian song. And for some the ensemble even becomes a normative model of symmetrical inclusion for contemporary societies. But the Orchestra exemplifies Rome’s diverse music – unexpected harmonies, rearranged tunes emerging from its neighbourhood markets, subway stations, and cafes – as much as it is made to represent multiethnic, multicultural, and world music. If, instead, we perpetuate the understanding of diverse artists as essential representatives and ambassadors of their ethno-religious group of origin, then basic questions need to be asked about these “microphoned” ethnic representatives, civilizational spokespersons, and religious entrepreneurs. Who elected them to such positions? From where does the legitimacy of such unbearable responsibility stem?

Venues of transformation

There is little doubt that political institutions “could gain great insight from the performing arts sector into the value of body language and visual, musical, and other non-verbal forms of expression in addition to discursive communication.”² Indeed, the flourishing of brochures, newsletters, and other forms of engineered efforts to foster diversity, dialogue,

and cosmopolitanism is certainly driven by good intentions, but it needs to be accompanied by experiential and less elitist opportunities – including artistic ones – for diverse social relations.

While stages are amplifiers of carefully prepared scores, choreographies, and scripted agendas, some space is left to improvisation, to the impromptu construction of signs and meanings. Audiences have therefore an active role in the creation of these meanings; they do not merely receive them. Performances are often free, delivered in public spaces such as piazzas, ports, and parks, and are a social event of bodily and emotional participation in an informal and relaxed setting. Thus, diverse performing arts do have the potential to involve in forms of cosmopolitan transnationalism not only artists and migrants, on occasion part of the public, but so-called locals as well, whom we cannot understand as stereotypically stuck and rooted in a spatially bounded culture.³ While they might not always enjoy the privilege of physical mobility, nor routinely partake in culturally and religiously diverse interactions, they are participating as engaged audiences in inclusively cosmopolitan sensibilities and dynamics, to be potentially cultivated beyond the lure of the ephemeral.

At any rate, we cannot expect the performing arts and their audiences to seamlessly solve the problems of asymmetrical relations of power in our diverse societies. In fact, many artists simply refuse to embrace a primarily social-political role. And yet, we can say that the artistic need for harmony often conveys an “impulse to change things around,” to quote Eugenio Barba, the founder of innovatively multicultural *Odin Teatret* in Denmark.⁴ But for most artists this impulse does not imply a missionary idea, or the pretentious desire to merely unmask anything or anyone without an accompanying self-analysis.

A self-scrutinizing standpoint is arguably integral to cosmopolitanism. Almost by definition, dialogic and cosmopolitan experience implies something new, rather than merely an exchange involving two individuals – as a false etymology would suggest. Cosmopolitanism, in particular, features a flow of meaning, practices, and unforeseen conflicts and understandings that were not readily available to individual participants in the first place, prior to sincere dialogic and cosmopolitan mutual engagement.⁵ Resisting the drive to shape and restore core values, roots, and identities vis-à-vis the alleged threats of immigration, Islam, and anarchy, certain stages could be seen not as places where exceptional “performances are done,” but where unexpected meanings might emerge and transformations occur.⁶ Venues where cynic late-capitalist obsessions with cost-effectiveness, immigration, civilizational clash, and blind loyalty to mother-fatherlands are routinely turned inside out, and de facto ridiculed in the name of critical, unpretentious, cosmopolitan citizenship.

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Notes

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