Nuances of Emirati Identity

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Identity, as a complex and multifaceted concept, has been a subject of exploration among various sociologists and theorists. Dual-identity Emiratis have long been a topic of discussion and introspection within Emirati communities.

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halfies   othering

1. Definition of Identity

Erik Erikson defined identity as the sense of continuity and coherence of an individual's self across time and situations, emphasizing its formation during adolescence through the integration of social roles and personal attributes (Erikson 2017). Charles Horton Cooley introduced the "looking-glass self", positing that identity is shaped through interactions with others and the reflections of one's self in society's eyes (Cooley 1902). George Herbert Mead contributed to understanding identity through his concept of the "self", suggesting that it emerges via social interaction and role-taking, shaped by societal expectations and norms (Mead 1934). Moreover, Judith Butler, a postmodern feminist theorist, focused on identity's performative nature, asserting that it is a continuous and socially constructed performance, particularly evident in her work on gender performativity. Butler highlighted the reinforcement of cultural norms and expectations through repetitive acts and gestures (Butler 2017). Additionally, Stuart Hall, emphasized "identity as a process", contending that it evolves in response to historical, social, and political contexts, with representation and discourse playing significant roles in its formation (Hall 2020). Lastly, Pierre Bourdieu explored identity in relation to social class and cultural capital, suggesting that individuals construct their identities based on their habitus, which encompasses internalized dispositions and preferences shaped by their social background and experiences (Bourdieu 2017). This diverse array of conceptualizations underscores the evolving nature of identity as a central theme in sociology and related disciplines, with ongoing research continuously enriching our understanding of its intricate nature.

The topic of identity in the Gulf Nations, particularly in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), presents a highly complex subject matter (Maitner and Stewart-Ingersoll 2016). While numerous studies have been conducted on identity in the region, the majority of these investigations tend to focus on the larger population groups, which is not directly applicable to the UAE due to its unique demographic composition. The UAE's local population, consisting of Emiratis, accounts for only 11% of the total population, making it crucial to recognize the distinctive nature of Emirati identity within the broader Gulf context. Consequently, the definition and exploration of Emirati identity remain ongoing and challenging topics among contemporary researchers. It is not uncommon to encounter sources that treat identity in the UAE as a generalized Gulf concept, potentially overlooking the specific complexities and nuances inherent to the Emirati identity. Therefore, in order to comprehensively understand the multifaceted nature of identity in the UAE, it is imperative for scholars to acknowledge and address the distinctive sociocultural dynamics that shape Emirati identity while avoiding broad generalizations that might oversimplify this intricate subject.

Following their independence from colonial powers, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states embarked on a project of rewriting their histories, often mediated by gatekeepers with interests in maintaining an image of stability, affluence, and security (Al-Rasheed 2013). In the United Arab Emirates (UAE), this has resulted in a common misconception that all Emiratis share similar ancestry, history, and cultural values (Potter 2014). However, the reality is that Emirati society has always been diverse, with significant contributions from Africans, Persians, Indians, and other ethnic groups (Akinci 2018; Al Mutawa 2016).

2. Identity Accumulation and Social Identity Theory

Identity accumulation and social identity theory are crucial frameworks for understanding the complexities of Emirati identity formation and the challenges faced by individuals with dual identities or hybrids.

Individuals establish several identities based on their social circumstances and associations. This implies the accumulation of both tribal and national identities for Emiratis (Sabban 2018; Cárdenas et al. 2021). This research acknowledges that Emiratis frequently have strong tribal affiliations based on their family histories, while also embracing a broader national identity as

citizens of the United Arab Emirates (UAE). These distinct identities coexist and intertwine, influencing the self-perception and social relationships of the individuals.

Social identity theory, pioneered by Tajfel and Turner (2004), offers a useful framework for comprehending the formation and negotiation of these dual identities. According to this theory, individuals derive a significant portion of their identity from the groups they belong to. In the context of Emiratis, tribal and national identities serve as essential social categories through which individuals create a sense of belonging, pride, and loyalty with their community.

3. Construction of Emirati Identity

A group of people said to Sheikh Zayed, the founding father of the UAE: "80% of your population is non-native". To this, his highness responded: "The blessings are from Allah, the wealth is from Allah, the creation is Allah's, and the land belongs to Allah, so whoever comes to live in this land, he is welcome (Saif 2017)".

The concept of a single "Emirati identity" was first institutionalized in 1971 by the late Sheikh Zayed Bin Sultan Al Nahyan, the founding father of the UAE. Sheikh Zayed faced the challenge of uniting the disparate and sometimes fractious emirates under a common banner, which he accomplished by promoting the slogan "one nation, one people, one identity" (Kazim 2000). This new national identity was meant to create a collective sense of belonging and assert the new state's independence from Western powers.

Advocating ethnic, religious and cultural solidarity was necessary for maintaining co-existence and national cohesion of the new state (Al Mutawa 2016). Thus, while the concept of a single Emirati identity has been promoted by the state since its independence, it has always been a dual identity, encompassing both a national identity and the individual identities of its diverse population (Al-Rasheed 2013).

Construction of Emirati identity is arguably one of the most politicized themes in literature (Picton 2010). Existing scholarly research on identity construction has either "Arabized" or "Persianized" the region's past. Native intellectuals such as Rima Sabban and Rana Al Mutawa have highlighted the Gulf governments' efforts to build a unified national identity through homogenizing the population (Al Mutawa 2016; Sabban 2018). Multiple and diverse Emirati ethnic groups, according to Al Mutawa, pose a challenge to the state, which has been pushing a singular identity for all UAE passport holders. Quoting Al Mutawa, "It is likely that cultural homogeneity is promoted because local diversity is seen as an obstacle to loyalty to the state. While tribal affiliations pose some challenges for GCC states, ethnic and cultural diversity may be seen as even more problematic" (Al Mutawa 2016). This assertion underscores the argument that a unified identity is considered crucial for maintaining regional and global stability. Nonetheless, cultural variety among local residents reveals that "a portion of the nation's past is non-Arab and contradicts the narrative of a common culture and heritage" (Akinci 2018; Al Mutawa 2016).

Ledstrup (2017) investigates the concept of Emirati identity and its relationship with social interaction in Ras Al Khaimah in his paper. Ledstrup argues that Emirati identity is a multifaceted and fluid construct shaped by a range of variables, including history, culture, language, and religion. He further explained the influence of social interaction on Emirati identity, emphasizing that social networks play a crucial role in developing both individual and collective identities (Ledstrup 2017).

4. Tribalism as a Marker of Lineage and Its Sociopolitical Influence

Tribal identity has, in an unanticipated turn of events, played a crucial role in sustaining national cohesion and loyalty among the ruling families of the Arabian Peninsula. This phenomenon is intrinsically linked to the rentier character of these states, whose abundant oil wealth enables them to provide generously for their citizens (Freer and Al-Sharekh 2021). As a result, the state has assumed the distributive duties formerly held by tribes, a significant step towards consolidating its authority. Tribalism remains politically and socially pertinent in the region despite this shift (Freer and Al-Sharekh 2021). Scholars such as Mehran Kamrava contend that kinship, oil, and religion have converged to produce a ubiquitous "tribal ideology" that permeates institutions and practices across the Arabian Peninsula (Kamrava 2012). This tribal ideology is not overtly criticized, but it has the potential to challenge monarchical authority by emphasizing the importance of ascriptive identity. In the Arabian Peninsula, tribal markers not only indicate social status but also proximity to the governing family, making them an intrinsic part of social life (Ibn 2015).

Understanding the connection between tribalism and contemporary life in nation-states has advanced significantly in the existing literature (Freer and Al-Sharekh 2021). As Freer and Al-Sharekh aptly note, "through elections, National Day celebrations, and the social prerequisites by which access to the state and its resources is achieved, individuals are increasingly called upon to express and utilize the consanguineal linkages of tribe" (Freer and Al-Sharekh 2021). This

underscores the role of civic rituals such as elections and National Day celebrations as platforms for reinforcement of cultural unity through the expression of national pride but also encourages citizens to align themselves with the collective identity of the nation. These activities highlight the consanguineal ties of tribes more and more, providing a framework for establishing and enhancing social authority. Within the context of Emirati hybridity, clans organize and classify the otherwise homogeneous citizen populations. Tribal identity has become a marker of identity rather than a way of life, becoming intertwined with national heritage and bolstering the national state's authority (Alexander and Mazzucco 2021a). Tribalism is used to reaffirm the historical lineage of governing families in newly independent states, connecting them to the pre-oil era of the Arabian Peninsula. This connection to authenticity and heritage enables the selective exclusion from citizenship privileges and benefits of certain segments of the resident population, particularly substantial expatriate communities (Freer and Al-Sharekh 2021). It is worth noting however that in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), recent amendments to citizenship laws have been introduced, allowing expatriates to acquire naturalization (Alexander and Mazzucco 2021b).

5. Exploring Spaces and Contemporary Discussions on Emirati Identity

The concept of "spaces" extends beyond physical locations and encompasses social contexts, where individuals have platforms to express themselves and reveal their hybridity or dual identities. These spaces serve as important arenas for identity negotiation, self-presentation, and the exploration of multiple facets of one's social existence. In this section, researchers will discuss the sociological understanding of spaces and their significance in the context of self-expression and hybrid identities.

The interplay between identity and social space has been a subject of scholarly investigation. Social spaces, such as organizations, communities, and online platforms, provide individuals with opportunities to express themselves and renegotiate their identities. These spaces act as arenas where individuals can navigate their social environments, interact with others, and engage in various forms of self-expression. Erving Goffman's seminal work on the presentation of self emphasizes the performative nature of identity in social settings (1959). Goffman argues that individuals strategically utilize different spaces, such as front stage and backstage, to present different aspects of their identity and manage impressions (Goffman 1949). Social spaces provide individuals with the opportunity to craft their self-presentation, showcasing specific facets of their identity that align with the expectations of that particular space. Hybrid identities, characterized by the blending of multiple cultural or social influences, emerge within spaces of cultural encounter (Brah 2005). These spaces offer individuals the freedom to explore and express their hybrid identities, highlighting the complexity and fluidity of contemporary social identities. Such spaces serve as sites for individuals to negotiate the diverse cultural elements that contribute to their identities and find avenues for self-expression.

On the subject of spaces, several platforms paved the way for discussions on Emirati identity. A viral TikTok video featuring nine young Emirati women sparked intense online debate surrounding the definition and characteristics of an Emirati. Posted online on 28 August 2022, coinciding with Emirati Women's Day, the video prompted discussions about the evolving nature of Emirati identity. In the video, one woman expressed that the identity of an Emirati woman is still being defined and remains a work in progress. The women showcased diverse traits, including speaking in English, non-traditional Muslim clothing, and body piercings, with a shared belief that being Emirati allows for personal freedom and self-expression. However, the video faced online criticism, with some expressing disapproval of the women's physical appearance and their presumed representation of Emiratis. Calls for legal action emerged, alleging national misrepresentation and misinterpretation of Emirati personhood. The video's impact extended beyond online spaces, becoming a prominent topic of discussion in offline spaces as well.

Following the heated debate on who represents an Emirati, Abdulkhaleq Abdulla, a retired Emirati professor of Political Science, wrote an article in CNN Arabia entitled: "Who is an Emirati? What is fixed and shifting in the national identity?" (Abdulla 2022). He notes that the current generation has a different way of identifying themselves. The Emirati youth today are more diverse than the former generation. They are confident, well-exposed and are polyglots. Therefore, he adds: "An Emirati with a different taste, attitude, habits and appearance is no less Emirati than his or her compatriots. An Emirati has no superiority over other Emirati except by loyalty". All Emirati share the same father—Sheikh Zayed Bin Sultan Al Nahyan—the founding father of the UAE and all Emiratis celebrate their birthday on December 2 of every year. Professor Abdulla concluded that the concept of Emirati is flexible today as long as the youth hold tightly to their cultural and religious values, such as respect and tolerance. Replying to Professor Abdulla, Aisha Abdulla Al Noaimi wrote an article in Al Khaleej newspaper with the title: 'Identity.. the wrong question' (Al Noaimi 2022). She critiqued Abdulla's mere question of 'who is an Emirati?' In a public platform he stated his question is inconsistent with the State's policy which emphasizes tolerance and acceptance of others. Such a controversial and unconventional question by a renowned figure would create friction among the Emirati

society, she said. Instead of focusing on who is an Emirati and who is not, she noted that the Emirati community should divert their attention to the challenges the Emirati identity is facing today.

In an article titled "Emirati Identity, the past, present and future" by Nasser Al Sheikh (Al Sheikh 2022) for CNN Arabia, he emphasizes the need to preserve Emirati national identity through the union language of Arabic, Islamic values, and ancestral heritage. Al Sheikh espouses: "Our national identity is at stake due to the wave of globalization and digitalization". Habib Al Mulla, a UAE lawyer, contributes to the identity discourse, highlighting the challenges posed by the Arab world's fascination with the West (Habib 2022). Al Mulla echoes Al Sheikh's emphasis on the importance of the Arabic language and adherence to the Islamic faith in defining Emirati identity.

6. Representation, Unifying and Distinguishing Factors

In contemporary Emirati society, the representation of hybrid Emiratis plays a significant role in understanding the complexity of identity formation. As globalization, migration, and cultural exchanges continue to shape societies, Emiratis with mixed heritage or experiences find themselves navigating multiple identities within their social context. The representation of hybrid Emiratis provides insights into the fluidity and diversity of Emirati identities, challenging traditional notions of a homogenous national identity. These individuals often incorporate elements from various cultural backgrounds, forging unique identities that are influenced by both Emirati heritage and the cultures they are connected to. This process of identity negotiation (Swann 2005) allows hybrid Emiratis to navigate the complexities of their multiple identities and find spaces for self-expression and self-identification. Representation highlights the dynamic nature of culture, where individuals actively engage in the blending and remixing of cultural elements, creating new expressions of identity. In parallel, social media platforms have emerged as powerful tools for such representation. Dedicated Facebook and Instagram pages serve as spaces for individuals to share their stories and lived experiences related to dual identities within Emirati society.

"*Half Emirati*", a documentary directed by Amal Al-Agroobi (Alagroobi Films 2016) delves into the social complexities and challenges faced by individuals who are the offspring of a mixed union between an Emirati and a non-Emirati. Through the stories of hybrid Emirati nationals, the documentary sheds light on what it means to be considered "half" in a society where identity through lineage holds significant cultural value. The documentary examines the societal expectations placed on these individuals and the challenges they face in being accepted into the culture to which they are expected to belong. Through their personal experiences and narratives, viewers gain insight into the struggles of navigating cultural and linguistic differences, as well as the impacts of discrimination and prejudice. An interview posted by The National News (2013) showcased three filmmakers including Al-Agroobi, who not only experienced the complexities of their nature as hybrids but also attempted to shed light on the matter through their films.

Another short film directed by Ahmad AlTunaiji demonstrates the struggles of a half Emirati. In the 2017 short film "Arasian," the story unfolds to depict the challenges faced by Khalifa, a 14-year-old half-Emirati, in his pursuit of acceptance. Khalifa grapples with concealing his half-Filipino identity from his Emirati peers, going to great lengths to keep it hidden. His communication with his Filipina mother is mediated through his younger sister, and he requests his mother to drop him off at the school's back entrance to avoid being seen by anyone. Within the school, Khalifa covertly befriends a Filipina cleaner. However, when the bullies at school uncover his secret, Khalifa is confronted with a pivotal decision that forces him to navigate the complexities of his dual identity and the consequences of revealing his true self.

The fear of being othered and ostracized for having different cultural backgrounds is a major theme in discussions concerning identity particularly in the Gulf region (Walia 2021).

Diener and Hagen (2018) have provided valuable insights by classifying the process of identity construction into centripetal and centrifugal forces, casting light on the intricate dynamics at play. Centripetal forces comprise various characteristics that enable individuals to develop a sense of belonging within a particular social setting. Typically, these characteristics include a person's personal history, tribal affiliations, and geographic location (Diener and Hagen 2018). These factors serve as unifying elements that cultivate a sense of unity and shared identity among individuals in a specific community. For instance, individuals may use their ancestry, cultural traditions, and local customs to forge connections and foster a sense of community. These centripetal forces can provide individuals with a framework for understanding themselves and their position in a broader social context.

On the other hand, centrifugal forces are characteristics that distinguish individuals from others, setting them apart and sometimes instilling a sense of superiority or exclusivity (Diener and Hagen 2018). These forces can both be innate and acquired. Inherent attributes refer to qualities that individuals possess by birth, such as physical appearance or biological characteristics, which may contribute to their individuality. Acquired attributes, on the other hand, are acquired or cultivated

characteristics that individuals adopt or develop to set themselves apart from others. These attributes can include education, affluence, language proficiency, and even cultural practices. Centrifugal forces play a significant role in the formation of individual identities, enabling people to assert their uniqueness or social standing in relation to others.

The interplay between centripetal and centrifugal forces in the construction of social, physical, and spatial identities is dynamic and multifaceted. Depending on factors such as cultural norms, historical contexts, and personal experiences, the significance and influence of these forces can vary. Societal and ambient factors can also influence the relative importance of centripetal and centrifugal forces. In certain situations, centripetal forces may predominate, nurturing a robust sense of collective identity and belonging within a community. This is especially true of closely linked cultural or indigenous groups, where shared history and geographical proximity contribute to a cohesive social fabric.

In societies characterized by diversity or hierarchical structures, centrifugal forces may have a stronger influence. In such situations, individuals may endeavor to assert their distinctive qualities in order to acquire recognition or navigate social hierarchies. This can lead to the emergence of distinct subcultures, social fragmentation, and the perpetuation of inequality. It is crucial to recognize that the interaction between these forces is not fixed or predetermined, but rather is shaped by historical, cultural, and contextual factors.

The relationship between social, physical, and spatial identities is a complex and ever-changing phenomenon, to conclude. Diener and Hagen's (2018) classification of identity construction into centripetal and centrifugal forces provides a framework for comprehending how individuals navigate social environments. The interaction between these forces affects the formation of identities, either through a sense of belonging and shared characteristics or through differentiation and distinction.

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