

‘We’re Normal. We’re Just Like You’ Gendered Practices of Cultural Exchange and Translation in Dubai

Jillian Schedneck

UNIVERSITY OF ADELAIDE

JILLIAN.SCHEDNECK@ADELAIDE.EDU.AU

Set in the Sheikh Mohammed Centre for Cultural Understanding (SMCCU) in downtown Dubai, United Arab Emirates, this article explores SMCCU Emirati volunteers’ assumptions about how their mainly Western visitors judge Emirati culture, as well as the ways those volunteers attempt to meet and challenge visitors’ expectations. Because of volunteers’ assumptions about their Western visitors, they present a liberal model of agency, and use the language of second-wave feminism, such as “choice,” “equality” and “empowerment,” to convince visitors that Emirati women are not oppressed within the UAE, but are instead thriving, with free and equal treatment to men. Volunteers typically provide presentations that include declarations of Emirati women’s modern, liberal agency, as well as demonstrations of distinctive Emirati cultural tradition. At times, volunteers move beyond the expected language of feminism within their cultural presentations to reveal a less one-dimensional representation of Emirati culture. Participant observation within this center and interviews with volunteers provides evidence for the ways in which the discourse of liberal agency shapes volunteers’ responses to guests who expect such answers. Using Saba Mahmood’s (2005) critique of the dominance of liberal discourse, this research shows volunteers’ awareness of this powerful discourse when discussing women’s choice and empowerment to Western audiences. Mainly, volunteers go along with the expected “script” of the Center, rather than attempting to convey different aspects of the lived experience of Emirati culture. However, at times volunteers do deviate from and go beyond that “script” to exhibit Emirati culture as wholly different and even superior to Western culture.

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INTRODUCTION

Many studies have looked at re-inscriptions of Muslim women's agency and autonomy (Bracke 2011; Fadil 2011; Fernando 2010; Jouili 2011; Jouili and Amir-Mozami 2006; Scott 2007) within European contexts using critiques of liberal notions of personal choice and freedom. These works have shed light on the ways Muslim women are compelled to speak back to non-Muslims concerning debates over women's religious practices, particularly female Muslim dress. While this work has been useful in a European context, there is a gap in understanding how Arabian Gulf women – specifically Emirati women, who are an elite minority within their own country – present, justify and defend aspects of their culture and religion to non-Muslim audiences. Using interviews and participant observation collected from the programs at the Sheikh Mohamed Centre for Cultural Understanding (SMCCU) in Dubai, this paper analyses how Emirati volunteers portray Muslim women's choice and agency to their non-Muslim visitors at the Center. While the SMCCU's purpose is more broadly to explain aspects of Emirati culture and Islam, gender issues have become the most important aspect of cultural exchange, arguably because of Western preoccupation with gender difference in other cultures, and because women's roles are seen as the markers of modernity or "backward" tradition. This paper argues that SMCCU volunteers are involved in a complex discursive situation that involves re-inscribing notions of Western liberal thought, particularly around gender. Volunteers align their responses with this dominant discourse, but also at times move beyond it, occasionally redefining its acceptable boundaries, and upholding significant difference. This paper demonstrates the useful application and limitations of recent reconceptualizations of agency and autonomy in relation to cultural exchanges taking place between Emirati religious and cultural identities and non-Muslim audiences within the global, modern city of Dubai.

While this paper emphasizes female volunteers' responses and the ways women are spoken about, I will also point to the broader challenges of answering cultural and religious questions in the intricate discursive setting that the SMCCU creates. Volunteers feel immense pressure to provide the "correct" answers about their culture and religion. My participants feel they are representing their whole country, and even the entire Middle Eastern region, to their visitors. Therefore, they expressed that their participation in the SMCCU is an incredible opportunity to share their culture with the world and bridge gaps in cultural understanding.

CONTEXT OF CULTURAL EXCHANGE

Since the discovery of oil in the late 1960s and the unification of the separate sheikhdoms into one united country in 1971, the UAE has been developing into the government's vision for a modern country. Dubai has emerged as a global city in recent decades, and globalization has become a buzzword when speaking about the emirate. Globalisation, which is associated with the open flow of commodities, people and knowledge, is also typically connected to domination and inequality, a threat to local culture, and a loss of identity, tradition and sense of place (Davids and Driel 2005; Elsheshtawy 2004). As Elsheshtawy (2004) points out, current discourses of globalization help maintain this narrative of loss, while also portraying Middle Eastern cities as disconnected from the rest of the world and unable to achieve the developments of the West. The SMCCU considers this line of thinking within their various programs, and utilizes strategies to counter these ideas. Another key aspect of the city's global status has been achieved due to the overwhelming migration of foreign workers to the emirate, constituting a majority population (AFP 2011). The UAE's subsequent development and the overwhelming presence of foreigners has had a downside, and indeed reinforces a narrative of loss as Elsheshtawy (2004) asserts. Citizens and rulers have been discussing the possible threats to, and loss of, cultural identity since the emirates united and the cities' development began (Casey 2010; Fattah 2006a; Fattah 2006b; Gergawi 2011; Heard-Bey 2005; Khalaf 2005; Sawy 2008; Schedneck 2009).

Emiratis are an elite and privileged minority within a foreign population of 88 percent (AFP 2011). They are often viewed by expatriate residents as rare and powerful, an unapproachable novelty. Several recent occurrences of public misunderstandings between Emiratis and Western expatriates has caused some animosity between these two groups. For example, there was an incident involving a British woman who stripped down to her bikini in Dubai Mall when approached by an Emirati woman for wearing an inappropriate top and violating the country's modest dress code (Casey 2010). However, these flare ups are irregular, but speak to a greater anxiety about multiculturalism and how much liberal behavior will be allowed and tolerated within Dubai. Even long-term expatriates have admitted to me that they have never even spoken to an Emirati. Actually knowing or befriending an Emirati is very unusual, especially for Western expatriates. As one of my SMCCU volunteer respondents stated, "there's not enough of us to go around." And, as several respondents explained to me, many Emiratis also do not wish to interact with non-locals who will only live in Dubai for a short time. The SMCCU is one of the few spaces where Emiratis and non-Emiratis do interact.

Therefore, the SMCCU¹ is a key site to observe processes of cultural exchange taking place. However, this form of exchange is not open to everyone. The cost of an SMCCU Ramadan iftar meal or cultural lunch at other times of the year has risen from free in 2007 to 135 dirhams (36.75 USD) for the iftar dinner and 90 dirhams (24.50 USD) for the cultural lunch in 2016. The expense of the SMCCU cultural meal events means that not everyone in Dubai can afford to be part of this program. The cost also demonstrates that these events are oriented toward wealthier Western tourists and expatriates, even though the population of Dubai is overwhelmingly a South Asian majority - most of whom are male laborers. The programs are aimed at non-Muslims audiences unfamiliar with Arab culture or Islam, and therefore attract mainly Western expatriates and tourists interested in a new cultural experience. Importantly, this suggests the West is considered as the most valuable outsider gaze, rather than South Asia.

At SMCCU events, such as cultural meals located at the center, volunteers begin by offering guests dates and hot beverages. Then guests are either led into one of the side rooms for small group discussions with one of the volunteers or remain in a larger group eating and listening to the SMCCU manager, Yusef, speak and answer questions, with input from the younger volunteers. At the Jumeriah Mosque tour, another SMCCU event, a female British Muslim convert explains the five pillars of Islam and how Muslims behave in a mosque to the typically seventy tourists and expatriates who take part in this tour, offered several times a week. In all SMCCU events, the majority of time is left for visitor questions, where they are encouraged to ask anything at all about Emirati culture or Islam. Volunteers have specific aims in answering these questions, which I will describe and analyze in later sections.

Between August and December 2011, I interviewed ten Emirati cultural exchange volunteers or presenters. I attended several cultural exchange events at the SMCCU, including iftar meals, cultural lunches, and tours of Jumeirah Mosque. The private interviews with volunteers are thus offset by their public interactions at the SMCCU.

As a researcher, I was perceived as Westerner, as I am a white American woman. However, since I informed respondents that my research was about

cultural exchange, and my questions asked them to reflect upon how they answer visitors' questions, they did provide answers that expanded past the typical responses conveyed during a cultural meal. As volunteers learned I had attended several SMCCU events, they knew to go beyond the usual rhetoric. Yet, I was still seen as an "outsider" who did not know much about Islam or Emirati culture, and certain ideas and answers were certainly "translated" for me. I believe that volunteer participants assumed that the audience for my research was Western readers because of my own background, although none asked, and therefore many of their interview responses stayed within the realm of "translation." However, since I asked questions about these acts of exchange and translation, the insights I received were greater than that of an SMCCU visitor. In short, my positionality did shape their answers, but the nature of my questions allowed them to provide more reflective answers about their cultural translation processes.

All of the volunteers I spoke to stated that the most popular misconception about Emirati culture and Islam was the perceived oppression of Muslim women, and this was the most important belief they wanted to dispel. Indeed, cultural discord between Emiratis and Western expatriates are mainly focused on gender relations in the Arab world; specifically, Muslim women's perceived lack of autonomy within their societies. This focus on gender prompts a majority of SMCCU visitors to ask if women have equal rights in the UAE, and for volunteers to respond in tactical ways. In the next section I will argue that while studies of European Muslim women's responses to debates over women's roles within Islam reflect similarities to the complex discursive situation that the SMCCU volunteers experience, there are also significant differences. SMCCU volunteers present various strategies in gaining acceptance, respect and even admiration from visitors, whereas the recent studies on European Muslim women's defense and justification of their religion most often only re-inscribed liberal notions of agency.

CHOICE, AGENCY AND EMPOWERMENT IN DISCOURSES ABOUT MUSLIM WOMEN

Scholarship has demonstrated a common belief within liberal secular culture that religious women, or those living within religious societies, lack or have limited agency (Amir-Moazami, Jacobsen and Maleiha 2011; Braidotti 2008; Mack 2003; Mahmood 2005; Mahmood 2001). Indeed, Mahmood (2005) describes normative liberal assumptions as "the belief that all human beings have an innate desire for freedom, that we all somehow seek to assert our autonomy when allowed to do so, that human agency primarily consists of acts that challenge social norms and not those that uphold them" (5). Similarly, Braidotti (2011) sees the dominant discourse shaping

1 The SMCCU functions as a non-governmental entity. However, the UAE government did donate the SMCCU headquarters to the Center. They are funded by income from the cultural meal attendance fees, as well as other events such as private corporate training in Emirati culture. Their official aim and policy is "Open Doors, Open Minds," and their logo is two halves of a cracked circle being held together by a black cord. The SMCCU aims to be that black cord holding the two sides, East and West, together.

Western thought as one where Western, Christian women who are “white or ‘whitened’ and raised in the tradition of secular Enlightenment,” have been emancipated and are not in need of any liberating policies. However, “‘their women’ (non-Western, non-Christian, mostly not white and not whitened, as well as alien to the Enlightenment tradition)” remain backward and “need to be targeted for special emancipatory social actions, or even more belligerent forms of enforced ‘liberation’” (Braidotti 2011, 6). These are the assumptions some Muslim women are choosing to debate, and also the assumptions volunteers at the SMCCU are considering and speaking back to.

Little work has been done on such cultural negotiations within the context of a Muslim country where locals are outnumbered by a majority multicultural expatriate population. Therefore, an understanding of how other Muslim women in similar situations have used liberal notions of agency and empowerment to explain and defend their religious and cultural practices to Western audiences is relevant to my study. Research focused on Muslim women in the European countries of France, Germany and the Netherlands provides an important complement and counterpart to my own study (Bracke 2011; Fadil 2011; Fernando 2010; Jouili 2011; Scott 2007). However, the conceptual framework of these studies derives from Mahmood (2005) and Taylor (2007), who have noted that modern liberal Western thought upholds religious ideals that conform to individual sovereignty; a person must have the ability to freely choose their own religious beliefs and practices. Thus, the Muslim women living in European countries in the studies cited above feel compelled to describe their religious experiences on these choice-based and personalized terms. Yet, as Mahmood (2005) points out, this is not typically the way Muslim women feel about wearing the headscarf or veil. The veil, which is often thought of as an expression of religious affiliation that is first felt inside the self and then symbolized outwardly, is rather constitutive of piety.

Through her research among Muslim women of the piety movement in Cairo, Mahmood (2005) contends that piety is formed externally and is then cultivated as an internal experience, rather than first understood internally and then expressed externally. Thus, the practice of veiling is not a mere representation of tradition and religious belief felt inside oneself, but an entirely different way to conceive of how a person becomes pious and expresses religiosity. This idea of cultivating piety externally through wearing the veil is unfamiliar to Western society. Thus, several studies have examined the ways in which Muslim women living in Europe defend their religious practices with talk of agency and individualized inner experiences, even if cultivating Islamic virtues through external signs is a more accurate explanation (Bracke 2011; Fadil 2011; Fernando

2010; Jouili 2011; Scott 2007). As well, obligation and submission to God might be equally compelling aspects of their religious subject formation that do not carry much weight within Western society.

Mahmood (2005, 8) defines the liberal concept of agency as “the capacity to realize one’s own interests against the weight of custom, tradition, transcendental will, or other obstacles (whether individual or collective).” In this predominating view of agency, women must act according to their own will, rather than custom or tradition, which is only viewed as holding women back from self-fulfillment of personal desires. This prevailing notion also holds that only when women are free from tradition and religion can they be considered autonomous and truly empowered. Indeed, agency has come to be understood solely as resistance against an oppressive power, yet this binary of subordination and subversion are not the only ways to conceptualize the term. Mahmood critiques these hegemonic assumptions. In particular, she challenges the belief that people living in modern societies will resist and eschew customs and tradition, and that these features inhibit one from achieving or even realizing their own desires and attaining them.

Using Mahmood’s (2005) critique of liberal notions of agency, research on Muslim women’s responses to European debates over banning Islamic female dress highlights their responses in important ways. Muslim women interviewed within France, Germany and the Netherlands employed strategies to counter hegemonic ideologies about their perceived lack of freedom and autonomy, and their submission to patriarchal authority. Yet these Muslim women are still speaking from within and to the dominant discourse on female empowerment, which views them as “backward.” For example, asserting that Muslim women have always been empowered, and that women’s liberation was already achieved through the revelation of the Quran 1400 years ago also displays attention to liberal discourse, and speaks back to that ideology (Jouili 2011). By stating that in Islam women have always been liberated and given equal rights, Muslim women are paying attention to certain Western ideas of gender norms. Thus, the female participants in these studies cannot easily break away from the rhetoric of women’s empowerment and freedom as understood in Western liberal thought, even if that is their intention. Within the Netherlands, Bracke (2011) has found that Muslim women respond to the public debates over their emancipation in several ways, which attempt to disrupt and also cannot help but acknowledge the dominant narrative of Muslim women who need to be saved from their culture. Bracke (2011) shows that “talking back” to these debates is a very complicated matter, since any subject that responds to the debate has been influenced by its ideology. Thus, any response must refer to, rely on and to some extent accept the legitimacy of its discourse (Bracke 2011).

While I argue that Muslim women do have access to alternative discourses, I acknowledge their difficulty in being understood if they speak to them.

The attempt to respond to European debates concerning the banning of headscarves, and international debates regarding women's religious freedom, can become mired within the dominant script of autonomy versus tradition. This ignores a more complex and accurate representation of Muslim women's subject formation that accounts for choice, adherence to religious duty and submission to God. Stating, or being allowed to state, that some Muslim women hold a different idea of agency – one that involves adhering to religious obligation and submission to God – was not admissible within the European debates (Fernando 2010).

The discursive situation of the SMCCU volunteers is similar to the Muslim women within France, Germany and the Netherlands discussed in the works of Bracke (2011), Fadil (2011), Fernando (2010) and Jouili (2011), as both groups of Muslim women are attempting to justify and redefine their own positions to secular, liberal minded audiences. While the context and purposes differ, the participants in my research are also positioned within and outside of liberal and feminist discourses through living in the multi-cultural city of Dubai. Both groups imagine their wider audience on similar terms: as a dominant group who misunderstands Islam and women's roles within it, and who engages in neoliberal thinking on choice and agency, and must be responded to on those terms.

Yet the Emirati volunteers' explanations of their culture and religion ultimately differ from that of Muslim women living in Western European countries. Emiratis are an elite minority within their home country. With this power comes instilled responsibility to convince visitors that Emirati culture is aligned with Western values as well as admirably different. In addition, volunteers are not speaking back to a particular debate or policy, but to a more implicit sense of how multi-cultural Dubai views Emiratis, as well as broader stereotypes about Arabs and Muslims that Emirati volunteers have absorbed. The studies on Muslim women living in Europe show that they are responding to specific criticisms against their religion and choices to cover, and are much more implicated in the liberal discourse of choice and agency because of this (Bracke 2011; Fadil 2011; Fernando 2010; Jouili 2011). They must respond along these lines if willing to engage at all, as these are the terms employed in the headscarf debate in Europe. The SMCCU willingly takes on a liberal discourse, and at times wishes to show their difference from and movement beyond it. Yet, while the SMCCU has the freedom to engage more deeply in articulating and expressing cultural differences, they most often choose not to.

Consequently, the differences between research

revealing the positionality of Muslim women living in Europe and my findings at the SMCCU show that Emirati volunteers have a greater opportunity to speak directly to a mostly willing audience. They can more easily speak to issues of cultural exchange in a direct and staged way than the often more disconnected Muslim women living in Europe who are less immediately involved in the debates taking place. However, this opportunity is not taken up as strongly as is potentially possible within the SMCCU.²

As seen in the case of the headscarf debates and bans in Europe, women and gendered practices are a contested site of cultural change and exchange. It has been well documented that women play key roles in nation building and global performances of modernity (Abu-Lughod 2001; Ahmed 1992; Baron 2005; Blom 2000; Gocek 2002; Kaler 2006; Kandiyoti 1991; McClintock 1993; Timmerman 2000; Yuval-Davis 1997); roles that are often manipulated and contradictory. The need arises for developing nations to portray the "modernness" and preservation of "traditions," and these concepts have often been embodied within the roles and practices of women (Kandiyoti 1991). Therefore, any formal or informal cultural exchange is likely to have a component of, if not focus on, gendered practices such as dress.

MUSLIM WOMEN REPRESENTING THE NATION

Debates over Muslim women's dress and the ways in which their perceived roles and treatment represent their nation have a long history (Abu-Lughod 2001; Ahmed 1992; Ahmed 2011; Lewis 1995; Lowe 1991; Melman 1992; Timmerman 2000). Ahmed (1992, 2011) has explained the West's Orientalist perception of Muslim women's dress, as well as the reaction of Muslim men and women to this perception. It becomes clear, as Yuval-Davis (1997, 45) has argued, that women bear the "burden of representation" for their nation. Women are placed in the precarious position of representing their "modern emancipation," as well as their commitment to following cultural "tradition," in order to define cultural change while demonstrating a move toward or away from Western modernisation (Chatterjee 1990; Esposito 1998; Joseph 2000; Majaj 2002).

The nation-building efforts of the UAE have indeed featured Emirati women as their most visible public relations tool and mark of development. Emirati women are highlighted for their advanced educational and career opportunities alongside their

2 As an alternative, for example, SMCCU volunteers could question the very idea of giving reasons for cultural mores and practices, and present alternatives to such calculated reasoning and rational thinking. I do not wish to promote certain tactics for cultural exchange above others, but only provide alternative ideas on what could be done but is excluded.

ability to maintain the Arabian Gulf's conservative Islamic values. The UAE leaders are lauded within the media and the SMCCU for their role in "empowering" Emirati women, by ensuring their equal rights within the law, and promoting national women's ability to preserve "traditional" values while interacting with new public spaces of work and commerce.³ The difficulty and primary task of the SMCCU is presenting this complex, symbolic portrayal of Emiratis women as both free and empowered, as well as traditional and religious: as relatable and similar to Western women as they are different.

Gender features so heavily in cultural exchange projects and dialogues because women's rights are part of the nation building exercise (Kandiyoti 1991; Yuval-Davis 1997), and because the questioning of Muslim women's rights is a natural extension of any Muslim dialogue with the "West." A key Western preoccupation with Muslim women has to do with their presumed lack of choice, agency, mobility and bodily freedom, which the West believes signals the "backwardness" of the nation. Because of this, women's perceived oppression outside Western countries will continue to be a crucial site of debate within practices of cultural exchange. The primary intention of the SMCCU is to convince Western visitors that their misconceptions about the Middle East – that women are oppressed – is not true. To convey this argument as conclusive, several tactics are employed, particularly what I call "cultural translation."

CULTURAL TRANSLATION

One of the main strategies the SMCCU employs to discuss the role and appearance of Emirati women within the UAE is to employ cultural translation or to explain aspects and practices related to Islam and Arab culture in a way that Westerners with liberal worldviews and beliefs can understand. This implies that the basic belief underlying cultural translation is that the two cultures involved in cultural exchange are isolated entities, closed off from one another, and translation bridges these gaps (Mandal 2009). Cultural translation projects typically depend upon such binaries: "my" culture and an "other's" culture. This binary of cultural exchange is an easy and simple framework to situate oneself within – one that Emiratis and tourists are familiar with from media and tourism throughout the Gulf.

Much literary fiction and visual art addresses the notion of cultural translation, and attempts to show that histories and cultures are intertwined and always mixing, rather than homogeneous or distinct (Desai 2006; Jarrar 2008; Kureishi 1990; Kureishi 2008). Indeed, in an interview, visual art professor

³ See the UAE National Media Council's *United Arab Emirates Yearbook 2010* and *Women in the United Arab Emirates: A Portrait of Progress 2008*.

Sarat Maharaj calls for the "self" and "other" to "equally plunge into free fall, breakdown and mutual re-making," and imagines, "the dislocutive scene of cultural translation [opening] up as an unfinishable existential, ethical encounter" (Fletcher 2000, 33). Thus Maharaj encourages a "shifting, collision, coalescing of cultural continents – a mucking up of classificatory order" (Fletcher 2000, 33). Emirati citizens and Emirati culture have indeed blended with other cultures throughout their history, and the views of artists who highlight cultural blending and hybridity are certainly relevant to the circumstances of the UAE. However, the implied assumption of unconnected and discreet cultures is still assumed at the SMCCU, and this is a large part of respondents' thought process when answering questions.

This act of translation can explain why some of my respondents expressed contradictions in articulating their positions. Participants often felt defensive and dissatisfied with the need to explain their culture to visitors. Yet these same respondents also stated that cultural exchange is their passion and they enjoy answering all questions. Volunteers expressed the view that visitors should have learned more about the UAE before arriving, but also that there was no way for tourists and expatriates to know the "truth" about Emirati culture besides visiting the SMCCU. And, finally, they spoke about repressing the urge to become aggressive in their defense of cultural practices, and also stated that it was simply nice of the visitors to come to the SMCCU with open minds and ask questions, rather than hold onto false assumptions.

These contradictions point to the difficulties involved in this selective practice of cultural translation. Hence, within the SMCCU, culture is made of artifacts, behaviors and actions that can be described, visualized and demonstrated. In one sense, the employment of this kind of cultural translation could be viewed as patronizing to guests, since volunteers are often closed off from the possibility of presenting a more accurate representation of Emirati culture and its interaction with the range of Western and non-Western cultures in Dubai. Yet, in another sense, the SMCCU's approach could also be seen as one inspired by respect for guests and a general sense of hospitality and welcoming. Translating certain cultural and religious behaviors into terms foreigners can understand could be perceived as respectful, effective and logical by appealing to modern rational thought processes. As one female SMCCU volunteer, Maha, stated to me:

I understand [visitors] wonder why do people start first eating a date [at the iftar meal] because I understand that seems weird. ...I talk to other Arabs and they say that it's because it's Sunnah. And Sunnah means that the Prophet did it. And I'm like, but they don't believe in your religion. So when you talk to someone who doesn't believe in

your religion you can't talk to them on the same line ... you have to ... talk scientific and go to common ground they understand and believe in. I can't say, 'oh, it's in the Quran.' But you don't believe in the Quran, so leave my Quran alone, that's my belief. And let's go up to logic. So it's proven that dates do settle your stomach down and break up the acid from long hours of fasting, so it makes sense to you. But if I tell you it's Sunnah it's not going to make you understand anything.

Maha feels that logic is the common denominator that will achieve acceptance, and she does not mind altering her answer, even if religious and cultural meaning is compromised.

However, there is another way that this consideration for guests can be perceived. Hiba, a female volunteer, spoke to me in these terms regarding Emirati hospitality, stating:

...usually we don't talk to Europeans or foreigners as if they don't belong here or [say]... 'why are you here?' Or 'what are you doing'? But when we travel outside, okay, they give us very dirty looks, you know? So it's kind of part of our tradition and even religion to be nice to people and welcome them.

While the tradition of hospitality is acknowledged in Hiba's response, a more important aspect of her statement is the way in which she promotes her culture and religion as more welcoming and open than Western countries. Despite feeling as though Europeans and foreigners are denigrating her culture, she is saying that Emiratis will continue to be welcoming and not question others' right to visit or live in Dubai. Thus, the SMCCU operates on a fine line. On the one hand, they are sincerely welcoming visitors and wishing to explain cultural and religious practices in a way Westerners would understand, appealing to liberal secular norms. On the other hand, there exists a distrust of guests' real beliefs about Emirati culture and religion, and moments of cultural superiority and alterity arise from such encounters and translations.

"CORRECT" ANSWERS

As part of an elite minority culture that is not lived daily by expatriates within Dubai, SMCCU volunteers are acutely aware of their roles as ambassadors of their culture, religion and country. This pride in representing their country is often felt to the point where some volunteers are nervous about giving an answer to a visitor's question for fear of getting it "wrong." As Sabeen, a female volunteer, said to me:

One bad thing happens and they will judge [the] whole country so we have to be careful. ... We have

the chance to show the world who we are. Big responsibility we have.

This awareness of choosing specific ways to answer questions is instilled through the SMCCU training. New volunteers are given a list of one hundred and fifteen frequently asked questions, as well as the model answers to those questions. During the Ramadan I spent in Dubai in 2011, the new volunteers were given the most popular fifteen questions to focus on. Although I was not permitted access to the full list of these questions, I did learn that the most common questions are about women's rights, women's dress, Emirati food, Islam as a violent religion, multiple wives, and the UAE political system. Volunteers are told to use these model answers as a base, and then put their own unique spin on the response.

In a direct sense, then, the SMCCU as an institution defines what is "right." More broadly, correct answers are collectively imagined by volunteers as a response to expatriate attitudes towards Emiratis and Islam, within Dubai and abroad. Through experiences interacting with visitors and Westerners through work and other travels, volunteers have internalized a sense of Western liberal values, and thus respond to this. The SMCCU FAQs reinforce this thinking and make it more explicit in terms of answer models to follow. The volunteers and the institution have aligned ideas of misconceptions they wish to dispel. Yet most volunteers had never thought about the meaning of their cultural practices, and are now being asked to articulate their self-awareness and present reasons for cultural practices they have witnessed and taken part in all their lives. Therefore, volunteers remain anxious over how to convey cultural information to guests. Another respondent, Rawdha, said to me:

Even amongst the volunteers ourselves we're like, 'you answer the question,' 'no, you do it,' because we are always afraid that we're not going to answer it good enough... We always want people's minds to leave opened with a whole new perspective of how Emiratis are ...so we're always looking for the best answer.

This kind of pressure is likewise felt within the Muslim diaspora. As Jouili and Amir-Moazami (2006) note, Muslim women in France and Germany are compelled in similar ways. Their studies show that Muslim women in these countries do not wish to convert others to Islam, but to change negative opinions about their religion, especially with respect to assumptions that Islam creates gender inequality. Similarly, Zine (2006) has found that Muslim girls in a Canadian Islamic school felt they needed to be careful with everything they said and did, as their behaviour would be seen as representative of Islam. It is the widespread negative opinion of Islam and the treatment of women that concerns the SMCCU

and many other Muslim women around the world. This reality makes the work of the SMCCU a serious and vital endeavor to volunteers who feel they are not only representing themselves, but also the Islamic religion and the Middle Eastern region.

For volunteers, the implications for getting answers “wrong” are that visitors will not leave feeling as though they have learned anything new about Islam or Emirati culture, or that visitors’ misconceptions will be reinforced. There are also limitations in getting it “right,” in that visitors will not know the deeper religious and culturally embodied feelings embedded within gendered, cultural and religious practices. Visitors will leave knowing that rational reasons for gendered practices have been addressed and explained, but perhaps “reasons” is not the right framework for such practices to be explained within. Indeed, volunteers told me that they did not think about any reasons for their cultural practices before their SMCCU involvement. Therefore, a deeper sense of cultural embeddedness would be a more accurate aim, but admittedly much harder to articulate to audiences, if possible at all.

REPRESENTING EMIRATI WOMEN AT THE SMCCU

The most important and striking point made about women’s roles throughout the programs of the SMCCU is the focus on Emirati women’s traditional dress. This is not surprising, considering that Muslim women’s various modes of covering have entered the Western popular imagination as the marker of religious extremism (Kahf 1990; Zine 2006). Muslim female dress is also viewed as synonymous with cultural difference and loyalty to patriarchy, which in turn supports the notion that Muslim women lack autonomy (Zine 2006). Covering has also marked Muslim women from colonial times as erotic and inaccessible (Kahf 1999). Thus, the ways SMCCU female volunteers portray themselves are negotiated within these constructs.

“I bet you’re wondering about these funny costumes.” Latifa, the British Muslim guide said during the Jumeirah Mosque tour in August 2011, pointing to her abaya and adjusting her sheyla. ‘Why do we women wear black cloaks in this heat?’ She tells the crowd that women would not want to wear anything else, stating that the abaya’s material is thin and loose, and that it creates a breeze while walking. Latifa noted its convenience; a woman can wear anything she wants underneath, and just ‘chuck’ it on without worrying about finding an appropriate and modest outfit in one’s closet. Finally, she mentioned that it was appropriate in all social situations and that black was a slimming colour.

Latifa also spoke about the many reasons a woman would choose to wear a veil over her face. Her main point is that covering, and styles of cover, are each woman’s choice, and each woman will proba-

bly have a different reason for what they choose to wear. The primacy of choice was echoed throughout my visits to the SMCCU, where female volunteers repeated that it was their choice to wear the abaya and sheyla – their long black cloaks and headscarves – and focused on its modern practicality. This justification is convenient for Western audiences and is presented in this way to encourage Westerners to see the volunteers’ choice to wear this dress as valid.

Practicality was not the only reason espoused by volunteers. Alongside mentioning the abaya’s beauty and variety of fashionable styles; volunteers expressed a wish to display national pride (which was framed as a universal desire) and demonstrating a woman’s personal and private relationship with God, which allows her to choose how and when to cover. All these reasons were also framed as choices: choosing a unique and beautiful abaya style, choosing to display one’s national pride, and choosing to demonstrate the degree of one’s piety. However, practicality is seen among volunteers as the best way to connect to visitors. Volunteers do not address the self in the ways theorized by Mahmood (2005) by explaining that the veil is the way they enact and constitute their religiosity, that piety is attained externally. Nor do they provide any of the complicated responses as explained to me by respondents outside the SMCCU. Rather, they adhere to concepts they believe are familiar to Western audiences. When I spoke to young Emirati women and men uninvolved with the SMCCU, no one mentioned the practical strengths and modern convenience of wearing the traditional dress. Instead, these other respondents spoke about their pride in displaying their national identity, as well as being modest and adhering to their belief in Islam, among other reasons. The variety of responses I received shows that Emirati female dress is bound up within cultural nuances, negotiations and contestations, rather than practicality.

In her study of Muslim women in Niger, Masquelier (2009) argues that the veil has become part of her participants’ social selves, facilitating their relationship with the wider world, and shaping the ways in which they interact within the social world. The veil protects the body, and in that way, Masquelier (2009) argues, it “plays an essential role in the constitution of agency, autonomy and subjectivity” (2009, 212). When Masquelier (2009) surveyed Muslim women in Niger on why they wore head covering, they usually responded: “We veil to cover our bodies.” Without much interaction with Western people, or feeling pressured to explain their culture to outsiders, their responses simply stated the fact of their covering as corporeal, rather than something that needs to be articulated as a means of personal choice. Masquelier (2009, 240), writes:

Because the meaning of veils, for some women, encompasses an entire mode of being in the

world that is acquired mimetically, the modesty expressed and cultivated through veiling obeys a logic that seems vested more in embodied experience than in conceptual categories. ... One could say, paraphrasing Bourdieu, 'It goes without saying because it comes without saying.'

However, even if these embodied ideas of veiling were undeniably shared by the female volunteers at the SMCCU, those ideas are not, and most likely cannot be expressed within the SMCCU. Or, if we take Masquelier's (2009) findings literally, those ideas cannot be expressed anywhere. While Emirati women appreciate the practical aspects of their national dress, it is also clear that this is not typically the first reason that comes to their minds when unprompted by the discursive situation within the SMCCU. Thus, within the SMCCU, these volunteers are giving the "correct" answer to their visitors; the correct answer being the one that guests will most easily relate to. Their responses connect to liberal thinking of personal choice and Enlightenment rationality.

My respondents also frame their ideas on choice in relation to Western attitudes about freedom and tradition in a different way. A female volunteer participant named Hiba said to me:

...the first opinion [Western people] have of us is that we are oppressed and not ...as free or open-minded as outsiders. And I really think that's wrong because we are free and open-minded but in our own way, you know? Under our own culture and our own traditions and our own religion, and we are comfortable with that ...Really I don't like it when they call us oppressed.

Several respondents strongly wish to be viewed as "free," but within their own framework and choices, with limits and restrictions that they choose to abide by. Hiba went on to say:

Americans and Europeans ... think being free is, you know, not covering her hair or wearing pants or not wearing the abaya. And ... in our religion we're not supposed to drink and ... we can't eat pork meat and it's all under ...good reason and we know those reasons and we accept them and we think it's for the best. That's why we do them, okay? To us, we want to do them; we want not to do them, ok? But maybe from their point of view they think, 'oh, why can't they do this?' We don't feel like we want to. We feel like we don't want to.

Echoing Rose (1999), Hiba feels that choice and agency is thought about in the West as freedom to choose without external pressure, and freedom from constraint. Here Hiba is declaring her choice to be constrained and limit her options. She also points out the limitations of Western definitions of freedom,

which she presumes prohibits Western women from wearing an abaya or headscarf. References to restriction came up often among respondents, as female volunteers wished to assure me and other foreign visitors that the abaya does not prevent them from doing things they wish to do. Volunteers realise the importance of stating that they are free to act without constraint, and if they are limited, that too is their choice. Rose (1996, 17) writes that people in modern society are not only free to choose, but "obliged to be free." Thus, life is understood as the result of choices made from a variety of possibilities, and we must justify our choices through articulating and demonstrating our motives and ultimate aspirations (Rose 1996).

Indeed, Mahmood (2005) states that in liberal thinking, an individual is only considered free when her actions are the result of her own will rather than of custom, tradition or societal compulsion. Therefore, the kind of rhetoric used at the SMCCU works to demonstrate and convince Western visitors of Emirati women's agency within a variety of life choices. However, within cultural exchange, difference must be upheld as well. Emiratis within the SMCCU also differentiate themselves from Western attitudes and attempt to provide alternatives to liberal secular thought.

DEMONSTRATING DIFFERENCE

Rose (1996) argues that the process of Othering includes contrasting oneself with other people, and understanding where you belong through comparing your home with other places. Emirati volunteers at the SMCCU perpetuate this process for themselves and visitors in several ways. Visibly, cultural difference is displayed through the traditional dress worn during the cultural exchange events, marking the Emirati volunteers as culturally very dissimilar to the Western women and men. Even as they attempt to convince guests that any Western woman would want to wear an abaya for its practicality, beauty and variety of styles, the differences between the expensive abayas and kandouras (the long white cloak Emirati men typically wear) - displaying wealth, taste and pride - and Westerners' outfits, is striking. While the traditional dress is presented as practical, it is also often shown as a superior, elegant option that the female volunteers wear with distinction. Thus, they are countering the idea that the unveiled body is "natural" and "free" and a veiled body is a violation of one's "corporeal autonomy or bodily integrity" (Fadil 2011, 97). As Treacher (2003) has noted, Western women are positioned by Westerners as those who are the truly feminine, and Muslim women's veiling breaches the notion of women's "natural" state and subjectivity. Therefore, Western women are viewed as more "real," and Muslim women who cover are viewed as lesser, "not quite the right thing" (Ibid,

70). Yet at the SMCCU, one could argue that veiling is shown as the “natural” and “free” state through volunteers’ comportment and ease of movement, as well as their deftness in explaining the various styles and choices involved in wearing the national dress. During demonstrations at cultural meals, volunteers often dress a Western woman in the abaya and sheyla, and then show how a woman wears the face veil and niqab. As much as these demonstrations are educational and hospitable, the discomfort of the Western women modeling Emirati dress compared to the ease of Emirati women appeared to be an intentional signal.

Beyond differences derived from Emirati female dress, there are also strong challenges to the meaning or illusion of gender equality. Yusef described to me how he would answer a visitor question about gender equality in this way:

Let’s say if a tourist asked me, ‘why are not women treated equally or the same as men?’ I’ll say, well, first, 21st century in Europe after fighting for so long to becoming equal with men, are we really equal? There’s no such thing as equal. Even men with each other aren’t equal, so let’s take the word equal out. Then, are you equal to a man’s pay in Europe? Do you get paid the same degree as a male with the same degree, the same position? And she will say ‘no.’ Ok, ...let’s talk about women positions in Arabia ...At one time women in Arabia were very elite and sophisticated and very superior in all over where in Europe they used to buy them and sell them, right? Gift them. And that’s the truth. ... so for a feminist I will answer in a way her mentality is. ...women are not second class [here] but at the same time don’t think that you are already first class and they are second, yeah.

Here Yusef is challenging the terms of the questioner: what is gender equality? Has any society achieved it? He is thus pushing the boundaries of liberal thought by questioning the terms of the debate, and European beliefs about their own society’s gender parity. He thus blocks contemporary notions of what gender equality looks like and believes that a historical perspective on women’s treatment should be included in the debate. However, this sort of boundary pushing is often not taken further than this. When I heard Yusef respond similarly to a group at a cultural lunch, visitors nodded in agreement, but the guests did not take up these ideas to further question why Europeans often presume superiority over Muslim societies. In addition, Hiba’s previous quote about Muslim women’s freedom to prohibit themselves serves as a similar moment where the boundaries of liberal thinking are pushed. She pointed to Western women’s limitations, in that many feel they cannot cover, which astutely count-

ers the notion that Western women have complete freedom and Muslim women are limited. These moments highlight the movement beyond the dominant discourse of liberal thought.

As Aitchison (2000, 144) points out, “the subaltern can speak (to the tourist) but upon stages where audiences and actors are differently engaged and differently empowered in (re)enacting and/or resisting hegemonic colonial and gender relations.” Indeed, SMCCU volunteers are certainly speaking, but upon prescribed stages with differing levels of empowerment and disempowerment, co-opting and challenging hegemonic discourses on Muslim gender relations. Aitchison (2000, 145) also believes that these practices can “shape and reshape the social – cultural nexus of gender-power relations in tourism...” This reshaping is taking place at the SMCCU through the strategies of aligning with Western cultural norms and liberal thought as well as pushing these boundaries as well. One respondent, Maha, told me that she hoped visitors understand, “It’s ok. We’re normal. We’re just like you.” As shown, there is a strong wish for universalism, to be seen “normal.” As well, there is a strong pull for distinction and a wish that expatriates and tourists would understand, accept and respect those differences and the pride Emiratis feel for their cultural history and modern development.

CONCLUSION

Within the SMCCU, the representation of women’s agency and freedom is highly selective, reflecting both consideration of liberal thought as well as significant alternatives to Western cultural norms as understood by the SMCCU volunteers and those working with the Center to put together the list of FAQs and their ideal responses. Deeper understandings of how some Muslim women enact piety are certainly not delved into, nor the ways in which choice and agency relates to submission to God and adhering to religious authority in the minds of many Muslim women. The intentional nature of the SMCCU volunteers’ cultural translation strategies highlights their difference from studies of European Muslim women, which reveal that these Emirati women also wish to engage in debates and explain the reasoning behind their cultural and religious practices. SMCCU volunteers employ a variety of strategies in order to be understood and seen as “normal, just like you,” even if that understanding is ultimately inaccurate. While this pull is strong, the pull for demonstration of difference also arises. Volunteers feel compelled to convince visitors of their shared liberal thinking, framed as shared humanity, as well as demonstrate Emiratis’ admirable cultural distinctions, and at times boundary-pushing disparities with liberal thoughts on the meaning of equality and freedom.

My paper has demonstrated the usefulness of Mahmood's (2005) critique of liberal notions of agency, and the ways in which its re-inscription by European Muslim women also connects to the context of the SMCCU. I have also explained the general difficulty of describing the significance of Muslim women's covering outside of liberal norms to Western audiences. My research has also filled a gap in understanding how Mahmood's (2005) critique of liberal norms applies to Emirati female volunteers within the SMCCU. Emirati volunteers

at times uphold redefinitions of liberal boundaries and significant differences, and this is also a key strategy of cultural exchange that must be taken into account in further studies in the area of cultural exchange. Recent re-conceptualizations of agency and autonomy can indeed be used to explain some of the cultural exchange strategies of the SMCCU volunteers, but frameworks that allow for intentional demonstrations of differences and redefinition must also be employed.

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