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Tourism, development and ‘destination Dubai’: cultural dilemmas and future challenges

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The aim of this conceptual paper is to provide a critical assessment of Dubai’s approach to tourism development, focusing on its cultural implications. The work initially observes ways in which the destination is building an image based on iconographic grandeur, monumental innovation and super-modernism. In doing so, the enquiry indicates that one fundamental sociological concern for destination Dubai is its perceived lack of cultural consistency, particularly in terms of the absorption of the old into the new. This position is evident through a paucity of heritage resources and institutions associated with the tourism market, as well as limited public knowledge concerning the ethnic and traditional elements of the indigenous society. Emphasising a more culturally focused tourism agenda could help to socially sustain and ground local communities (and identities) threatened by rapid urbanisation and Westernisation. However, one noted dilemma relates to the complexity of defining and deconstructing indigenous forms of ethnicity and identity. Nevertheless, the discussion claims that it is imperative not to lose sight of the possible opportunities for the productive advancement of localised forms of tourism and cultural capital. The paper concludes by highlighting the importance of examining the diversity of local perceptions of tourism, culture and development within an empirically informed framework.

Keywords: Dubai; tourism development; culture; heritage; tradition and indigenous society

Introduction

Tourism development in Dubai has attracted considerable academic attention (Bagaen, 2007; Balakrishnan, 2008; Govers & Go, 2005, 2009; Henderson, 2006a, 2006b; Junemo, 2004; Sharpley, 2008; Yeoman, 2008). Although many of these insights conceive Dubai as a visionary form of tourism development, some problems and challenges are disclosed, including a few pressing environmental concerns, international division of labour issues (Sharpley, 2008), limitations in the availability of natural and cultural heritage attractions (Henderson, 2006a, 2006b) and problems of the way in which ‘brand Dubai’ is being positioned, especially because of the limited utilisation of local representations and its culturally informed imagery (Govers & Go, 2005, 2009). More recently, work has started to focus more on sociological-based concerns about the social impacts of tourism (Stephenson & Ali-Knight, 2010) and the political economy of tourism development (Meethan, 2011).

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The aim of this paper is to focus on the cultural implications of Dubai's tourism development approach, which in an era of rapid social change is an important topic of enquiry. A prevalent concern in the sociological study of tourism is the cultural demise of destinations and the problematic role of non-indigenous forms of tourism development. It has long been established that tourism is inextricably tied up with the modernisation process, having a penetrating affect on cultures and local societies (Erisman, 1983; Nunez, 1963; Turner & Ash, 1975), and thus perceived as 'the enemy of authenticity and cultural identity' (Turner & Ash, 1975, p. 197). Nevertheless, tourism can have a productive role in encouraging cultural competence within a society and nurturing cultural, regional and national identities (Park & Stephenson, 2007). Accordingly, the study of tourism and its role in fostering expressions of cultural and national identity has been widely discussed (Palmer, 1999; Park, 2010, 2011; Soper, 2007).

This paper discusses cultural-based concerns and challenges that Dubai faces in its emphasis on a Westernised approach to tourism development. One of the key objectives is to draw critical attention to ways in which indigenous and traditional-based resources do not significantly feature as part of the destination's overall strategy. Whilst local culture and tradition are not promoted as central and holistic elements of the Dubai tourism experience, the work shows how new forms of heritage are being manufactured which will contribute to an international legacy for the future. This concern is apparent in the primacy of innovative, unique and illimitable forms of architecture and landscape, which significantly attract global attention and iconographic appeal. Nonetheless, it is asserted that given that the past is of fundamental importance to solidifying local, cultural and national identities, particularly as it helps to foster an understanding of the region's indigenous attributes and resources, tourism's potential role in this process needs to be assessed. However, as the latter part of the paper indicates, achieving a systematic or coherent representation of cultural identity is an arduous task. Nonetheless, the discussion finally recommends ways to address a localised and culturally sustainable agenda. For the moment, however, it is necessary to first explain how 'destination Dubai' has evolved and developed, and then to critically evaluate the reasons as to why Dubai uniquely expresses itself as a destination of distinction.

'Destination Dubai': developments and advancements

In 1971, Dubai became one of six Emirates (Sheikhdoms) of the independent federal nation of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), along with Abu Dhabi, Ajman, Fujairah, Sharjah and Umm al-Qaiwain. Ras al-Khaimah, in the north of the region, joined the federation in 1972. Prior to this period, the region as a whole was known as the Trucial States because of a series of peace treaties that were periodically established between the Sheikhdoms and the British colony. The British dominated the Gulf region from the nineteenth century, which was previously controlled by the Portuguese from the early 1500s until the mid-1700s. Two powerful tribes in the region were the Qawasim, originally from Persia and located in Ras al-Khaimah and Sharjah, and the Bani Yas who originated from the Najd region of Saudi Arabia (Al-Qasimi, 1988; Zahlan, 1978). This tribe comprised over 20 sub-tribes with one dominant faction being the Al-Bu Falah, which settled in Abu Dhabi in the late 1700s. Another main faction was the Al-Bu Falasah, which established itself around the Dubai Creek in the mid-1830s under the leadership of Sheikh Maktoum bin Buti.

Dubai's economy was traditionally based on camel breeding, fishing, pearling and sea trade. Increased trade and inward migration led to the establishment of ethnic communities such as Baluchis from Pakistan, Bastaks from Persia and Bahrainis from Arabia. Gulf

pearling declined from the 1920s, partly because of new technological advances and an increase in competitive sources of supply. Japan, for instance, started to artificially culture pearls. The large-scale dredging of silt in the Creek in the early 1960s enabled the rapid development of the port facilities and international trade. Along with the electrification of Dubai in 1961, such projects helped to advance Dubai's profile as a crucial centre of trade in the Gulf region (Kazim, 2000). Like other Arabian countries, UAE's rapid economic development and modernisation from the 1970s was due to the production and exportation of oil. Since the early 1990s, however, Dubai pursued an economic diversification policy due to the gradual depletion of its oil reserves (Dubai Strategic Plan – 2015, 2007, p. 21). The advancement of service sector industries was encouraged by national and international investment, as well as policies based on the fundamental principle of market liberalisation (Shihab, 2001).

Economic modernisation and financial development in the UAE led to rapid population growth. By the end of the first half of 2010, UAE had a total population of 8.26 million. Emirati nationals only represented 947,997 of the population whilst non-nationals numbered 7,316,073 (Sanbridge, 2010a). Dubai's population was estimated to be around 1,200,309 in 2005 (EIU, 2006). By the first quarter of 2010, its population reached 1.8 million (Sanbridge, 2010b), though only 168,000 were actually classified as nationals (Sanbridge, 2010a).

The 1970s and 1980s boom in the construction industry laid the pathway for a buoyant service sector industry. Tourism was earmarked as one of the main enablers of economic growth. In January 1994, seven airlines initiated direct flights from the UK to Dubai (Laws, 1995, pp. 190–192). Dubai also developed its own carrier, Emirates Airline, which was founded in 1985. According to Laws (1995), this development was a response to Dubai government's concern that low numbers passing through the airport would limit its status as a regional trade hub. The Dubai Commerce and Tourism Promotion Board, established in 1989 with the purpose of promoting Dubai to up-market tourists and business communities from largely affluent societies (Laws, 1995), was replaced in 1997 by the Department of Tourism and Commerce Marketing (DTCM). This proactive Dubai government body had wider duties to oversee the planning, development and supervision of the tourism sector. DTCM operates around 18 overseas offices in major tourist-generating countries and is responsible for marketing in such continents as Africa, Asia, Australia, Europe and North America. DTCM's proactive role in developing destination Dubai quickly began to reap positive results. The 2008 Country Brand Index identified China, UAE and Croatia, respectively, as the top three 'rising stars', predicted to become major tourist destinations (TTN, 2008a).

Popular tourism destinations thrive on political stability, encouraged by positive perceptions of social safety (Sönmez, 1998). According to the UK Economic Intelligence Unit, UAE leadership has a 'strong grip on power' and there is 'no organised political opposition . . . various ruling families are generally popular and well regarded within their own emirate' (EIU, 2006, p. 10). The UAE foreign policy has systematically avoided political conflict in the region, formulating a series of strategic alliances (e.g. the defense pact with the USA, signed in 1996) and becoming an active member of the Gulf Co-operation Council. Tourism development endured two Gulf Wars and the 9/11 aftermath, and the UAE continues to attract tourists at a time when the Arab world is rife with political conflict and social turmoil, as witnessed in the Arab Spring uprisings. Also, the tightening of regional security in the Strait of Hormuz and the Gulf region, partly in response to the Iranian government's continuance with its nuclear programme, has provoked considerable reaction from Western and pro-Western nations and heightened political tension in the region.

Dubai received 6.9 million visitors in 2007, and aims to achieve 15 million by 2015 as part of the government's long-term strategy (TTN, 2008b, p. 9). The subsequent economic recession had some impact on the tourism industry. Hotel occupancy rates decreased to a conservative estimate of 73% in the first quarter of 2009, reduced from an almost 90% occupancy during the same period of the previous year (Bains, 2009, pp. 36–37). The significant decrease in hotel occupancy in the first half of 2009 led to sharp reductions in room rates. In some cases, it was reported that some five star hotels lowered rates by up to 40–50%, especially to attract the domestic market through special weekend rates (Safdar, 2009). Dubai as a tourism destination had been proactive in creating exclusive tourism and hospitality products but its strategy of 'massclusivity', involving high-income groups consuming luxury ('exclusive') products en masse (Stephenson & Ali-Knight, 2010), has to some extent been challenged by the global economic recession.

In light of a global downturn, affecting the financial capacities of those who originate from such tourist-generating markets as Germany, Russia, the UK and USA, as well as the need to sustain the rapid development of tourist-serving infrastructure (e.g. retail outlets, hotels, amusement parks, and event and entertainment venues), the market opportunity for the evolution and expansion of budget hotels in Dubai has become a more compelling opportunity. Market adaptation to the new economic climate is illustrated through the market positioning of two and three star hotels by such companies as Ibis, Centro, Holiday Inn Express and Premier Inn, as well as the local hotel chain, Citymax. The UAE has the largest number of branded budget hotel rooms under development in the region (Bundhun, 2012). The rapid increase of low-cost airlines in the Middle East and the development of new routes, locally illustrated through such UAE-based carriers as Air Arabia and Fly Dubai affirms the likelihood of targeting broader market segments. One ongoing challenge for DTCM is to encourage tourists to stay in Dubai for a longer period, where the average length of stay is around 3.6 days (*Khaleej Times*, 2012). Subsequently, the attempt to secure the broader and less exclusive mass tourism market may very well be one important destination intention, particularly given the 15 million target projections by the Dubai government.

The emirate experienced a positive upwards trend in terms of tourist visits and hotel occupancy numbers for 2011, when around 9.30 million tourists visited Dubai compared to around 8.49 million in 2010, a growth rate of 10% (Rahman, 2012). Dubai also witnessed a 7% surge in passengers in the first quarter of 2011, compared to the first quarter of 2010, where 12.3 million passed through the airport compared to 11.5 million over the same period in 2010 (Jain, 2011). Of the top 10 source markets for Dubai for 2011, Saudi Arabia was the largest tourism market with around 873,152 guests, followed by India (702, 142), the UK (643, 196), Iran (476, 708), USA (462, 653), Germany (275,633), Kuwait (273, 253), Russia (255, 746), Oman (223,993) and Pakistan (221, 374) (*Khaleej Times*, 2012). The upwards trend in tourism numbers can partly be attributed to the Arab Spring uprisings in the region, where operators in tourist-generating countries redirected clients to stable destinations in the region. One Russian tour company, for instance, sent tourists originally bound for Egypt to the UAE (Everden, 2011).

Despite political challenges with the Middle East, the perception of Dubai (and the UAE as a whole) as a safe destination is essential for economic optimism and tourism growth, and for the advancement of liberal trade policies and international investment. Initiatives favourable to investment opportunities in Dubai are wide-ranging: no corporate tax, income tax, foreign exchange controls, trade barriers or quotas; or restrictions on capital repatriation; and complete ownership within the 'free zones' (Dubai Business Handbook, 2008). Free trade zones are geographically distinct areas aiming to facilitate international

trade. The Jebel Ali Free Zone, for instance, established in 1983 after the construction of Jebel Ali Port, has attracted over 2000 international companies. Such zones are also considered to be prime sources of employment and inwards investment (Rao, 2000), and are strongly encouraged as part of Dubai's development strategy. Other examples are International Academic City, Car and Automotive City, Dubai Airport Free Zone, Health Care City, Internet City, Media City, Sports City and Dubai International Finance Centre. However, internationalised patterns of investment often promote types of development that are naturally non-indigenous in form, structure and content.

Free trade zones illustrate how economic diversification and market liberalisation operate within a national policy that welcomes globally motivated forms of investment. Nasra and Dacin (2010) emphasise that the development and expansion of free zones prominently show how the government and its institutions operate as international entrepreneurs, taking entrepreneurship away from its traditional roots commonly associated with private sector innovation and market enterprise. In relation to the position of the government, Sharpley (2008, p. 27) informatively notes:

... Tourism planning in Dubai follows an apparently hybrid model, whereby central state planning is combined with approaches more common in market-led economies, although the power and influence of the state remains dominant.

Dubai as city of superlatives and hyper-real experiences

Dubai's development ethos is based on the desire to be bigger and brasher than the rest of the world. The intention to build a financial and tourist centre to rival those of the West. Dubai has produced a range of world records: highest building (Burj Khalifa); largest amount of prize money for a horse race (Dubai Cup); first purpose built maritime centre (Dubai Maritime City); first (informally recognised) 'seven star' hotel (Burj Al Arab); tallest hotel (JW Marriott Marquis Dubai) and the highest residential tower (Princess Tower). Burj Khalifa, which also accommodates a hotel designed by Giorgio Armani along with 700 private apartments and corporate offices, possesses the world's fastest elevator and the highest mosque. The tower's architect and engineer, Skidmore, Owings and Merrill LLP (Chicago, USA), affirmed that: 'The goal of the Burj Dubai (*now Burj Khalifa*) Tower is not simply to be the world's highest building; it's to embody the world's highest aspirations' (Baker, Korista, & Novak, 2007, p. 361). The process of constructing tall buildings is described by Elsheshtawy (2010, p. 164) as a 'sign of power and progress'. It emulates similar projects in the West, such as the Eiffel Tower. In his seminal study of the Eiffel Tower, Barthes (1979, p. 6) observes that the architectural obsession with the 'conquest of the sky' also took precedence in America and England in the nineteenth century. Barthes' semiological deconstruction of the Eiffel Tower instructively applies to Khalifa:

Further, by affording its visitor a whole polyphony of pleasures, from technological wonder to haute cuisines, including the panorama, the Tower ultimately reunites with the essential function of all major human sites: autarchy; the Tower can live on itself: one can dream there, eat there, observe there, understand there, marvel there, shop there ... (1979, p. 17)

Barthes' analysis draws attention to ways in which the Eiffel Tower encourages visitors to understand and perceive the various stages of history, particularly through the ability to peer over the Parisian landscape and observe the various monuments and sites of interest that have been built at different historical periods. However, what distinguishes the

Khalifa from many such grand monuments is that it signifies an ultra-modern society and a history that is less grounded in time and place.

One objective of Dubai's obsession in achieving 'world records' is its aim to attract international attention through positioning the destination as a city of superlatives, an unrivalled city with the desired intention to make history and move beyond established geographic, socio-cultural and economic boundaries. The emirate has also witnessed a variety of more frivolous world records, some examples being: the largest apple pie, biryani bowl, shawarma, human flag, incense burner, chocolate bar, paper clip, shopping trolley, newspaper ball, kandoor and chopsticks. Dubai also boasts of the longest parade of Mercedes-Benz cars, the largest gathering of men named Mohammed, the first cloned camel (named 'Injaz' – 'Achievement'), the first 'cama' – a cross between an Arabian camel and an Andean llama, and the longest line of sandwiches stretching 2.6 kilometres (estimated to feed 5000 labourers) (Janardhan, 2005; Michaels, 2005; Saberi, 2010; Spencer, 2009).

The 'world' as a symbolic construct is also emblematically endorsed through the micro-reconstruction of 'the world' itself. Accordingly, 5 kilometres from Dubai's coastline exists over 300 artificial real-estate islands representing each country within each continent. The range of developments that have taken place in Dubai has led one journalist to describe the emirate as the 'largest architectural experiment on earth' (Rose, 2005). Other developments manifest a host of new-fangled experiences. For instance, 'retailtainment', referring to the post-modern trend of closely combining shopping and entertainment opportunities within one arena, has patented itself onto the consumer landscape of Dubai. Shopping malls are simply more than places to purchase consumer products. The Dubai Mall, for instance, accommodates an indoor aquarium, cinema complex, dancing fountain and an Olympic sized ice-rink. The retail industry has a symbiotic relationship with the tourism industry, exemplified by the Dubai Shopping Festival. This annual event was launched in 1996 and operates over a number of designated weeks. The shopping phenomenon originates from the Duty Free Shopping Mall of Dubai International Airport, which developed from the late 1980s and by 1993 had the world's largest number of stock lines (Laws, 1995, p. 179). Given the popular appeal of shopping tourism, it is of no surprise that hotel developers in the region are selecting locations zoned for retail space (Salama, 2008).

Dubai has a fundamental role as an 'instant city' and a 'product of a super-fast urbanism' (Bagaean, 2007, p. 174), where everyday culture is being constructed through hyper-real experiences. The evolution of modern heritage bypasses the production of ethnically grounded heritage experiences, contributing to a process described by Giddens (1994, pp. 92–93) as the 'detraditionalisation of social order', whereby the past has 'lost its hold' because the future significantly attracts 'compelling interest'. The emirate is becoming a place of symbolic reflection and cultural fluidity rather than a place of deep-seated historical identification and localised cultural entrenchment. Junemo (2004) discusses the meanings embedded within the Palm Island concept as a:

... generic place whose symbolism does not relate to a specific culture ... facing fleeting and undefined cultural expression ... Strolling on the Palm will involve playing with associations of what is already known about the cultural themes, which will be hugely different depending on one's cultural background. (p. 189)

Steiner (2009) points to Dubai as a novel representation of a 'hyper-real destination' as opposed to a heritage destination in a purely historically and culturally grounded sense. New concepts and initiatives develop which signify symbolically loaded messages

associated with the strategic reconstruction of tourism spaces. The Burj Al Arab, for instance, which is built on an artificial island and designed to imitate a sail on an Arabian vessel, is popularly conceived as a destination icon and is an integral part of the overall image of Dubai. This hotel is thus a visible expression of ‘symbolic capital’ (2009, p. 9), due to its international media appeal and high social status in the world of iconography. Images of Tiger Woods teeing off on Burj Al Arab’s helicopter pad prior to the 2004 Dubai Desert Classic, and Andre Agassi and Roger Federer playing tennis on the same location in the run up to the 2005 Dubai Duty Free Men’s Open (Mouland, 2005) indicate the symbolic and strategic value of this building in representing destination Dubai.

The notion of ‘symbolic capital’ also relates to the celebrity endorsement of Dubai as a globally recognised destination with significant social assets. One illustration of this is the official opening of the Atlantis Hotel on Palm Jumeirah in November 2008, attended by Oprah Winfrey, Janet Jackson, Michael Jordan and Robert De Niro and Kylie Minogue (Harnan, 2008). Other celebrity associations exist in Dubai. In the culinary industry, for instance, the UK celebrity chefs have established their restaurant brands in Dubai: Gordon Ramsey’s ‘Verre’, Gary Rhodes’s ‘Mezzaniene’ and Jamie Oliver’s ‘Jamie’s Italian’. In the sport industry, the Dubai-based football club, Al Wasl, secured the management services of the Diego Maradona from 2011 to 2012. In the film industry, Tom Cruise performed stunts on the exterior of Burj Khalifa for the movie, ‘Mission Impossible: Ghost Protocol’, which was released in December 2011 (Huang, 2011).

‘Beyond the veneer’: social reality and a decolonial agenda

Although the economic recession meant that some mega-projects were scaled-down, or put on hold or even terminated altogether, Dubai invented and invested in an image that captured international attention. According to Yeoman (2008, p. 140): ‘Dubai is the crème de la crème of luxury and revenue per tourist’ and thus ‘is not about authenticity, sustainability and everything green – but about pure indulgence and conspicuous consumption’ (p. 147). This glamorised perception of Dubai is often mythologised at the expense of failing to disclose the ‘other side of Dubai’ – i.e. the lives of ordinary people with normalised consumption patterns and lifestyles. The worlds of those living in such older communities such as Satwa, Al Jafilya and Al Karama thus rarely feature in the touristic vision of Dubai. These lifestyles are not fully acknowledged by Western media, which has either focused on its ‘razzmatazz’ image or its ‘darker side’ – i.e. a world of two extremes: the super-rich and the poor (*BBC News Magazine*, 2009; Hari, 2009).

The iconic modernist landscape not only stands as a representation of symbolic capital but also as a testimony to decolonisation, signifying ways in which Dubai (and the UAE) has moved towards an agenda of self-determination, political autonomy and economic freedom. During the colonial era, Dubai was locked into a dependency relationship with Britain. On a political level, it was assured of British ‘Trucial’ protection, proving to be useful in instances of territorial and/or tribal conflict with other Sheikhdoms (Onley & Khalaf, 2006). On an economic level, financial dependence was apparent in Britain’s intervention in pearl trading in the region during the nineteenth and early twentieth century. In an attempt to increase dependency and economic control of the pearl trade and limit outside interference, especially from other European merchants, Britain blocked the importation of pearling equipment, thereby preventing the region from expanding its industry and foreign markets (Davidson, 2008). The denial of new equipment and steam-powered ships also deprived pearl divers of a healthy work environment, and they often suffered from skin diseases, respiratory illnesses and long-term poverty (Al-Fahim, 1995). Faced

with increased global competition, the industry deteriorated considerably in the 1930s, contributing to widespread economic decline in the region. Destination Dubai is thus a manifestation of its ability (and desire) to overcome a coercive and economically harsh past.

Dubai's compulsive need for world acclaim illustrates ways in which it recreates an anti-traditionalism and a level of achievement in the face of the 'West and the rest'. The endeavour is to break new ground by investing in a new cultural fabric based on the manufacture of novel experiences and the strategic advancement of global patterns of consumption, as well as being innovative in the development of monumental and architectural grandeur. In an inimitable way, its new cultural landscape indicates that heritage is indeed in 'the making': invented and created rather than preserved and conserved in a familiar western sense. Indeed, ultra-modernisation stands as a threat or as a social challenge to any serious attempt, intended or unintended, to advance a tourism agenda which favours culturally rooted experiences focused on indigenous forms of heritage and tradition.

Striving for cultural consistency: rooted heritage and tradition

Dubai's tourism industry constructs its tourist itineraries based on the production of ludic forms of enjoyment and common forms of entertainment. Outside of the city itself, desert safari activities such as 'camel riding', 'dune bashing' and 'sand boarding' are endlessly marketed and perceived as integral to the Dubai tourism experience (*Discover Dubai*, 2011). These experiences popularly exemplify ways in which the tourism script not only disengages with culture, but also potentially derides the prospects of appreciating indigenous life. Despite Dubai's unique pathway to development, its social and physical engagement with Western culture is certainly evident. Within a social development context, the promotion of such sport-based activities as cricket, football, golf and rugby has been a significant priority, indicated by such mega-projects as Dubai Sports City, which is a US\$4bn mixed-use development comprising 50 million square feet and incorporating five major sports venues (*Dubai Sports City Newsletter*, 2009, p. 8). The emirate is also host to a range of 18-hole golf courses, often located around sought-after residential areas in close proximity to hotels and restaurants, tourism locations, and other sport and recreational complexes. These courses contribute to Dubai's image as a valued golf tourism destination, indicating how the city is socially (and culturally) planned. Nevertheless, the golf industry promotes elitist societies and socially exclusive lifestyles, limiting social interaction and integration with other urban communities. Miller, Lawrence, McKay, and Rowe (1999) emphasise that the neo-colonial context of western sport is not conducive to the advancement of civic forms of social development.

Indigenous-based social activities within the region, especially those which are historically associated with the Bedu and desert life, serve to remind nationals of ways to celebrate their culture and society. It is true that cultural heritage is represented through such local sport activities as falconry, camel racing, dhow (a traditional boat) racing, saluki (an indigenous dog) hunting races and bull fighting. With regard to the latter activity, for instance, this sport has ancient origins beyond its common association with the former Portuguese influence in the region, where the bull was a 'common motif in the pre-Islamic religious art of Southern Arabia' (King, 2001, p. 72). However, global modes of mobility influence the nature and content of such cultural-based activities. For example, although camel racing in the Trucial States was popular in the tribal communities during annual festivals. This sport has grown in significance in the past two decades to the point that it can be described as a 'heritage sport' (Khalaf, 1999, 2000), it should be considered as an invented tradition because its cultural content has become institutionalised and far removed from its original

association with weddings and religious events. This sport not only involves bedu tribesmen and members of the ruling elite but also now includes transnational migrant workers from such countries as Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Sudan. These labourers are involved in farming, shepherding, camel grooming and training, and camel market work (Khalaf, 2010).

One of the fundamental sociological concerns for Dubai is its perceived lack of cultural consistency. Limited attempts to ensure that the past is successfully immersed into the present thus leads to a lack of complementarity between the old and new. Rapid urbanisation and modernisation have had considerable impacts on 'Islamic cities' in the Middle East, threatening historical districts and local heritage (Orbasli, 2007). In Dubai, there have been some initiatives to restore selected areas, especially those perceived to be aesthetically conducive and authentically pleasing to the 'tourist gaze' (Urry, 1990). For example, steps have been taken to conserve what remains of the Bastakiy'ya district, a collection of about 40 traditional buildings close to Dubai Creek, which recalls the earlier life in the region. This was the district where merchants originally settled from the Bastak region of southern Persia. However, the absence of local life and social continuity (Orbasli, 2007, p. 181) implies that the district is culturally disconnected from its past. Moreover, although there was some attempt to restore parts of the district in the late 1970s (e.g. restoration of Dubai Fort and its transformation into a national museum), many other historical buildings deteriorated and were eventually destroyed in the 1980s (Elsheshtawy, 2010). It is significant that only around 300 of the 3000 historic buildings in the city of Dubai survived modern expansion (Paradkar, 2006). The Director of the General Projects Department at Dubai Municipality noted:

We are losing our built heritage at the rate of one historic building a day. Unless they are protected by law, there's little that can be done to reverse the process. (Paradkar, 2006, p. 29)

In general, Dubai's modern buildings have superseded its vernacular and indigenous architecture, culminating in the demise of older parts of the city. However, Dubai has not completely abandoned its regional roots as some new building designs and structures reflect the 'Arab eclectic' (e.g. the Atlantis Hotel) (Elsheshtawy, 2010, p. 146). Moreover, there are several museums promoted as part of the tourist circuit (e.g. Al Ahmadiya School, Sheikh Saeed's House and Al Fahidi Fort, which houses the Dubai Municipality Museum). However, Dubai's tourism industry does not overtly focus on cultural products as the major component of the destination product, compared to the neighbouring emirate of Sharjah. In examining 'heritage revivalism' in Sharjah, for instance, Fox, Mourtada-Sabbah, and Al-Mutawa (2006, p. 285) discuss the emirate's policy to revitalise itself as an Islamic city as well as a cultural and educational centre. This is reflected in its museum infrastructure (e.g. Sharjah Natural History Museum, Sharjah Art Museum and the Museum of Islamic Civilization). There has also been some international recognition of traditional activities and practices in the UAE as a whole. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) formally recognised falconry and sadu (specialised form of weaving) in 2010 and 2011, respectively, as unique and worthy forms of intangible cultural heritage (Ahmed, 2010; *Gulf News*, 2011, p. 4)

The scarcity of heritage resources and institutions reflecting Dubai's history, ethnicity and tradition has societal repercussions. In Govers and Go's (2005, p. 86), content analysis of photographic and textual material of 20 Dubai-based company websites, it was concluded that Dubai's image as a destination does not 'coherently reflect its true cultural identity'. Therefore, if the destination image is not accurate, then the host culture can be misconstrued. Edson (2004, p. 354) asserts the social importance of heritage resources in that they:

... have extraordinary emotional and intellectual appeal since they evoke a feeling of prestige and, therefore, a sense of pride. They help to generate an environment where people can acquire an awareness of the continuity that exists in human creation, glimpse a past that they receive with admiration and gratitude, and project the future to which they will transmit the results of their own endeavours.

One ethnic source and practice that reflects a sense of cultural pride but at the same time can be utilised by the tourism and hospitality industry to characterise localness, is the production of local cuisine. Whilst it is generally understood that cosmopolitan cities and tourism destinations popularly cater to cuisine that represents the common ethnicity or nationality of the locality, and also multicultural influences through the fusion of foreign and local dishes, the development and promotion of local cuisine can arguably contribute to sustainable tourist experiences and the long-term sustainability of local cultures (Reynolds, 1993). However, although Emirati or 'local' cuisine is culturally distinct (Iddison, 2001), it remains a rather nebulous concept in UAE's food and restaurant industry. With the exception of isolated establishments (e.g. Al Fanar Restaurant in Festival City), this cuisine is infrequently available. Instead, Arabic food is popularised as local food and commonly existing in tourist enclaves through the prominence of Lebanese and Moroccan restaurants. In representing the Arabic world of culinary arts, these types of restaurants often achieve highly commended awards in the emirate of Dubai (Robinson, 2011).

Establishing a localised tourism agenda

Comprehensive information concerning tribal ethnicities, conflicts and affinities and stories and traditions of Bedu life is rarely available in the Dubai tourism world. Any such understanding is often marginalised to academic texts or framed within the social memories and life experiences of the locals themselves. Therefore, the complexities of how ethnicity is constructed and how ethnic identity is defined are unexplored by the tourism industry. Only the broad term, 'Emirati', is familiar, implying an identity associated with a politically defined region or relating to a localised geographical positioning of identity. Even the infrequently used term, 'Dubaian' (or 'Dubayyan'), has little resonance in the tourist imagination, despite its importance for Dubai nationals and tribal membership is even more obscure to outsiders. Heard-Bey (2005, p. 367) informatively notes:

Their identity as citizens of the UAE and their newly created nation does not detract from their sense of belonging to their particular tribe ... Through this chain of mutual loyalties and belonging, every national is a member of and forms part of the society of his or her emirate ... But towards the rest of the expatriate inhabitants of the UAE and to the outside world, they are nationals of the UAE or simply 'Emiratis'.

However, the collective identity of a UAE national is often difficult to determine because of the region's tribal diversities and histories (Rugh, 2007), and due to the fact that modernisation and immigration affect the production of various permutations of who constitutes a 'national'. In any critical discussion, which concerns ways in which heritage is understood or represented, it is important to grasp how local rather than national identities are constructed. One starting point would be to acknowledge a purist definition of local Dubai ethnicity, connoting membership of, or sense of belonging to, the Al Bu Falasah section of the Bani Yas tribe. In a more diluted context, however, it could also relate to associations with other sub-sections of this larger tribe, or indeed other regional tribes that have settled in the emirate. However, other categories of locals or Emiratis exist

beyond the context of the tribal affiliations in the region, such as the 'Ayam' or 'Iyem', who are Sunni Muslim descendents from the Gulf coast of the Persian Empire. Other naturalised groups include those with at least one parent who are naturalised Arabs from a non-Gulf country, or those who originate from destinations in South Asia, particularly Balochistan (Kanna, 2010).

Another representation that has yet to be fully contextualised relates to the identity construction of the 'Afro-Emirati'. Khalifa (2007) investigates ways in which tribal populations previously interrelated and communicated with slaves of African descent. She explores contemporary associations between Dubai society and African heritage, especially in the form of music, cultural rituals and ceremonies. The pearl industry was associated with African slaves who significantly represented the diving crews. Khalifa observes that since the modernisation era, especially from the early 1970s, socio-economic change has meant that such cultural practices as music have become far less continuous and more customised by modern society.

Dubai's tourism industry intentionally or unintentionally has thus missed a clear social opportunity to 'tell the tale of region' in acknowledging the diversity of the culture, ethnicity and race of the indigenous community. It is true that the telling of such tales could be a rather sensitive task and possibly conceived as an undiplomatic act, especially in the ideological context of the collective state of the UAE. However, an indigenous-led model of heritage tourism development, albeit a complex one, could help to socially sustain and ground local communities threatened by pro-Western cultural influences and rapid urbanisation. Enriching the tourism industry with an increased focus on forms of cultural representation would help to foster an understanding of the diversity of geo-ethnic identities and socio-cultural diversities in the region, as well as advancing a deeper ethnic awareness of the complexities of Dubai's history and heritage. For example, the legacy of the challenges associated with pearl diving has a significant bearing on the social structure of indigenous life in Dubai, influencing poetry, music and folklore, and other art forms (Humaid, 2011). The key concern for some sections of Emirati society is how social change impacts their local communities, but at the same time how culture and heritage permeate, particularly in a more informal and privatised manner. An Emirati writer, Al Shehhi (2011, p. 8), intuitively notes:

There are socio-cultural and geo-political dimensions to the presence of people from more than 200 different nationalities in the UAE ... many in the conservative Emirati society suffer the repercussions of an identity crisis ... There is a vast cultural inventory in every Emirati house. It is an accumulation of the heritage of our parents and grandparents ... If this cultural inventory is used in the right way, it would help a great deal in shaping our national identity.

Stephenson, Russell, and Edgar (2010) emphasise that one direction for the UAE is to develop local concepts of hospitality but within a wider framework of Islamic forms of tourism development. This could involve the strategic development of Shariah-compliant or Islamic-friendly hotels, advancement of Islamic principles of business and finance (including philanthropic ventures), progression of Islamic art and architecture, and the growth and marketing of a diverse range of Islamic-based festivals and events. Such developments would also promote service encounters based on Islamic notions of honorability, reverence and hospitality. Given that 5 of the top 10 tourism markets in Dubai for 2011 originate from Islamic countries (i.e. Saudi Arabia, Iran, Kuwait, Oman and Pakistan), there may well be a significant latent demand for such Islamic-based products, services and initiatives. Moreover, the emerging trend towards well-being, lifestyle and spiritual

tourism means that Western and non-Muslim markets could be attracted to Islamic forms of hospitality and tourism (Smith & Kelly, 2006).

However, a major stumbling block to establishing an indigenous-led approach to UAE tourism development concerns the tourism and hospitality industry labour force, which is significantly unrepresented at various occupational levels by Emirati nationals. Although Emiratis comprise around 20% of the UAE population, expatriates workers hold 99% of all jobs in the private sector and 91% in the public sector (Langton, 2008). The hospitality sector is identified as one of the most problematic sectors of employment as it has failed to respond to the government's drive towards workforce indigenisation (Al Deen, 2009). It may be the case that, the positioning of nationals in key service sector roles within the industry to deliver and manage hospitality (and tourism) products and services could encourage stronger representation of indigenous values and increased cultural production. Such local representation would encourage tourists to have some direct contact with the indigenous community. According to the Director of the Sheikh Mohammed Centre for Understanding:

We have a unique situation in the UAE where locals are a minority and the majority are expats. It is our duty as the minority to introduce our traditions to foreigners who know nothing about our life, our language, and our history. (Flemming, 2011)

The long-term objective is to challenge the popular view that the tourism industry in Dubai is associated with frivolity and liberalness, conspicuous forms of Western consumption and an ethnically divided workforce. A more intensive level of involvement of Emirati nationals at specific levels within the industry would significantly promote that objective. Nonetheless, the Islamic approach to tourism and hospitality could be appealing, encouraging the development of localised forms of representation and recruitment. Working within an environment which discourages behaviour perceived to be 'haram' (unlawful), such as the consumption of alcohol, could be conducive to more work-place representation from the Emirati community.

Conclusion

In attempting to provide a critical assessment of Dubai's approach to tourism development, this paper has focused on concerns relating to the way in which 'destination Dubai' does not consistently represent its cultural past, 'localness' and indigenous attributes. Rapid urbanisation and modernisation define and redefine ways in which Dubai's tourism industry develops. Lack of prioritisation to the production of cultural heritage forms of tourism is a missed opportunity for destination Dubai, where tourist experiences are often socially detached from culture and tradition. As the Dubai case shows, there is a need in newly developed modern societies, especially those preoccupied with making an immediate and profound appearance on the global stage, not to lose sight of the various possibilities associated with the critical advancement of more locally produced cultural products: museums, heritage centres, indigenous sport, cuisine and festivals. Dubai has significant potential to develop and promote such localised forms of 'cultural capital'. Nonetheless, more research and empirical-based evaluation concerning the cultural content and value of such products is necessary to advance a clear understanding of their relevance in attracting a wider tourism audience. Public bodies should actively promote the development of regional cultural histories, and the knowledge management of local ethnic resources and intangible heritage sources as part of the overall tourism experience.

Although the establishment of Islamic tourism experiences could be an important resource-based objective, there is still a need to utilise cultural and ethnic resources pertinent to Dubai and thus dissimilar to the other six Emirates, and other Middle East destinations. Only through tapping into an indigenous agenda would this be possible. Unless of course, Dubai's development agenda is exclusively perceived as a strategy to establish (or invent) new forms of culture and identity, where heritage is being manufactured and superficially induced so as to portray a society based on global intentions. The city's iconographic ambition and desire to be architecturally unique and different certainly represents cultural plurality. While the creation of new-fangled initiatives and iconographic prototypes may very well become reconstructed forms of heritage for future multi-ethnic generations to appreciate, the lack of strategic focus on the advancement of indigenous forms of tourism could have an unproductive impact on existing local culture and society. One important initiative could be for knowledge-based institutions to engage more with the social memory of various representatives of the local, indigenous populations as a way to narrate and record cultural heritage. Indeed, as Park and Stephenson (2007) have implied, memory is a necessary agent with which to proactively construct and reconstruct times and places in diverse ways within a given heritage or cultural landscape.

One immediate priority that has been emphasised relates to the crucial importance of deconstructing what we actually mean by 'Emirati' identity and culture. Proactive deconstructions at state-level representation would enable a clearer vision of how national identities can be constructed and represented through the tourism and heritage industries. Islamic forms of tourism and hospitality, as well as an increased indigenous workforce presence in the tourism industries, could help to augment cultural representation.

However, there is a final point to consider, the degree to which the indigenous community or members of the wider Emirati community are willing to be caught up in the process of acculturation and Western influence, which is not yet fully understood. The privatisation of social life and social detachment from tourists (and to a lesser extent expatriates) may be one way to cope with the fact that Dubai (and the UAE) is often under the international spotlight, vulnerable to public scrutiny and the political gaze of Western nations. The iconic landscape may help to deflect attention away from any perception of an indigenous Dubai. Left to deal with the social changes of urbanisation and different interpretations of belonging, local communities may very well be aware that cultural associations with desert life do provide meaning and an important social context with which to endure ultra-modernisation, cosmopolitanism and hyper-reality.

In other words, the right of indigenous communities not to be integrated into the tourism strategy has to be respected. Although a conceptual-based enquiry is purposeful in provoking debate and pinpointing areas necessitating critical treatment, it is imperative that 'local perspectives' and 'community voices' are empirically examined. This would help to attain an ethnic insight into how destination Dubai is 'locally' visualised and conceived, and how tourism and its relationship to culture, tradition and social change is parochially constructed. The overall objective would be to understand multiple (local) constructions of tourism, tourism development, culture, tradition and heritage, as well as deciphering multifarious readings of the region's rich and complex cultural heritage.

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