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NEW MIDDLE EASTERN QUICK STUDIES

National Dress in the UAE: Constructions of Authenticity

RANA KHALID ALMUTAWA*

The book cover pictured here shows a bureaucratic hand peeling off a superimposed Western suit to reveal the local Gulf Arab man wearing a *dishdasha* (figure 1).¹ The implication of the image, on the cover of a book about nationalization and change, is that to be an authentic *khaleeji* (from the Gulf) one must don the appropriate attire. National dress has become one of the most important signs of who is, and who is not, a *khaleeji* in most Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states. The black '*abaya*' worn by women and the white *dishdasha* worn by men stand out as visual signals among the sea of variously dressed foreigners who constitute a majority of GCC populations.²

It is easy to assume that national dress as it exists today was an integral part of people's lives in the pre-oil era, and that this historical connection is the reason that many *khaleeji* citizens often hold on to it so dearly. However, this Quick Study will argue that the national dress represented as part of deeply rooted history and culture in the UAE is constructed and that the *dishdasha* and '*abaya*' are not as authentic as commonly portrayed. I will use photographs from Instagram accounts dedicated to preserving history as archival sources, as well as anecdotal evidence from my own experience as an Emirati teaching Emirati Studies to



Figure 1: Instagram/Esra2qtr

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¹ *Dishdasha* (also known as *kandora*), a full length dress worn by most men in the Gulf. Usually white but also worn in other colors such as gray or pale yellow. In the winter, it is sometimes worn in darker colors made of heavier material. *Khaleeji*: denoting something or someone from the Gulf. Image accessed 19 December 2016: https://www.instagram.com/p/vu_1AbOhf7BPUkc-h5MejCOd5YQR2rFv3uCu40/ (private account, permission granted).

² '*Abaya*', a full-length, black cloth worn by most women in the Gulf as an outer garment outside the house. It is recently starting to be worn in different colors.



Figure 2: Flickr

identity, explaining that national dress is used to tie them to a pre-oil, local heritage and differentiate them from foreigners who live in their countries.³ However, these works do not



Figure 3: Flickr

local students at a national university in Dubai. It is important to note that Instagram photographs are unverified sources with regard to date and location. However, for countries such as the UAE, photographs such as those in this article (of both men and women) are not to be found in accessible archives.

Scholars such as Sulayman Khalaf and Anh Nga Longva have investigated the ways Gulf citizens use national dress to assert their national identity, explaining that national dress is used to tie them to a pre-oil, local heritage and differentiate them from foreigners who live in their countries.³ However, these works do not interrogate the construction of national dress as a tradition rooted in pre-oil society; the actual practice of donning the 'abaya and dishdasha is taken for granted.

In many of the GCC states, national dress is the epitome of national identity.⁴ "National dress" in this paper refers to the clothes both state and society endorse as the official Emirati dress, clothes perceived to be an integral part of local history and an example of the people's connection to the "authentic" local life

³ Sulayman Khalaf, "National Dress and the Construction of Emirati Cultural Identity," *Journal of Human Sciences*. Winter (11), 2005. Anh Nga Longva, *Walls Built on Sand: Migration, Exclusion, and Society in Kuwait*. Westview Press: 1997.

⁴ Khalaf, 2005, *ibid*.



Figure 4: Wikimedia

of the past.⁵ Authenticity here denotes a purely Emirati (or Qatari, Kuwaiti, etc.) culture, one supposedly untouched by foreigners and outsiders. In 1983 Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger wrote that: traditions “which appear or claim to be old are often quite recent in origin and sometimes invented.”⁶ National dress in the UAE appears old, yet it is at times modern and invented. Emirati women today use the ‘*abaya*’ (a full-length black outfit), rather than the *burqa*’ (a gold covering of the eyebrows and lips), to showcase an Emirati identity they believe to be rooted in the region’s pre-oil history.⁷ Yet, as this paper will showcase, it was the *burqa*’ (figure 2),⁸ and not the ‘*abaya*’ (figure 3),⁹ that was an integral part of women’s dress in the

pre-oil era.

Furthermore, national dress today is more standardized than in the period before GCC nation-building, glossing over the diversity that existed within the Gulf region. The standardization has helped create an “imagined community” with a single history and culture.¹⁰ For example, national dress today uses the Najdi/Bedouin *ghitra* and ‘*aqal*’ as a headdress, and excludes the Persian headdresses previously worn by some Emiratis. This standardization of national dress also helps promote an image of a pure Arab and Bedouin heritage and tradition. While there is a degree of regional variation (in Kuwait, and sometimes Bahrain, women do not wear the ‘*abaya*’ and men wear the *dishdasha* to a lesser extent), these UAE observations tend to hold across the Gulf States.

The photographs that accompany my text show the national dress under consideration here:

► 6,911 views

صور رائعة للمصور العالمي #إيف_إندرو لاثقة المرأة **banatzayed**
١٩٧٠ بالتحديد وإمارة #دبي ومن الواضح حرص الإماراتية في عام
المرأة الإماراتية لبس الذهب على الدوام 🇦🇪 🇦🇪 🇦🇪

Beautiful photos for the famous photographer
#evearnold of Emirati ladies in 1970s ... I loved how
stylish they were back then 🇦🇪 🇦🇪 🇦🇪

Figure 5: video caption at Instagram/banatzayed

⁵ Ahmad Kanna, *Dubai: City as Corporation*. University of Minnesota Press: 2011. Kindle e-book, location 1553 and 2109.

⁶ Eric Hobsbawm, “Introduction: Inventing Traditions”, in *The Invention of Tradition*, edited by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1983), p. 1.

⁷ *Burqa*’, to be distinguished from the *burqa*’ worn in countries such as Afghanistan or Saudi Arabia, which covers all or most of a woman’s face. The *burqa*’ under consideration in this article, also known as the *batula*, is a gold-colored mask which covers the eyebrows and lips, as well as parts of the cheeks. See figures 2, 6, 7, 8, and 9.

⁸ Image accessed 19 December 2016: https://c2.staticflickr.com/4/3513/3239001303_aefaba133c_b.jpg.

⁹ Image accessed 19 December 2016: https://c1.staticflickr.com/2/1622/24138389056_f0d85fceb9_b.jpg.

¹⁰ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, (London and New York: Verso 1991).



Figure 6: Instagram/emirates_date

the *dishdasha*, the '*abaya*, and the *burqa*'. Figure 3 shows women wearing the '*abaya* and the *shaila*'.¹¹ In some cases, newer '*abayas* are being worn with different colors, and the *shaila* is sometimes wrapped loosely on the head, showing some of the woman's hair. Many wear the *shaila* in this manner, and it is considered to represent "national" dress as much as a complete covering of the hair in the UAE. The man is wearing the white *dishdasha* or *kandora* that is worn in all the Gulf states (with some variations). On his head is the white *ghitra* and the black '*aqal*'.¹² In figure 4,¹³ the *dishdasha* or *kandora* is worn by all the men in the photos. The two men in the front have the black '*aqal* over their *ghitra*. In figures 2 and 6, the women are wearing the *burqa*'.

The Construction of National Dress:

In the UAE, as in many of the Gulf states, illustrations in school books and ministry advertisements dress their characters in what is considered national attire (the '*abaya*, *shaila* and

¹¹ *Shaila*, a headscarf worn by most women in the Gulf. Usually black, it can either cover the whole hair or may be wrapped loosely on the head to allow the fringe and some hair to show.

¹² *Ghitra*, a men's head-dress, worn in different styles depending on preference as well as region. Usually white, it also comes in a white and red checkered material, which is commonly worn in Saudi Arabia. Few have flower designs and patterns at the edges. '*Aqal*, a black, rounded rope placed on top of the *ghitra*.

¹³ Image accessed 19 December 2016: <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/6e/Dishdasha.jpg>.

dishdasha) to represent local traditions and history – and society accepts these representations. Many GCC nationals believe that the current conception of national dress represents their local heritage.¹⁴ For those who bemoan the erosion of traditions in the UAE, the first thing that comes up in discussions is national dress, and people are quick to call for stricter reinforcement of dress codes.¹⁵ Yet these are constructed and invented traditions, what Hobsbawm defines as “a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual of symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past.”¹⁶

Prior to the 1970s, *khaleejis* of non-Arab backgrounds (such as those of Persian origins) only started wearing the *ghitra* in the 1970s and 1980s – before that, they wore Indian and Persian headdresses.¹⁷ Reem Elmutwalli states that only very wealthy women wore the ‘*abaya*, while most other women wore a colorful, traditional dress with a short, sheer black cloth over it (all wore the *burqa*’).¹⁸ According to older Emirati women, the ‘*abaya* is an import that came from Saudi Arabia, and was previously not commonly worn.¹⁹ Elizabeth Shimek reports a professor of textiles at Riyadh University saying that the ‘*abaya* is a moderately new trend which came to Saudi Arabia from Syria or Iraq less than a century ago, a view echoed by older Saudi women as well.²⁰ Yet, women today are socially expected to don the ‘*abaya*, which is portrayed as a deeply rooted aspect of Emirati (or Qatari, Saudi, etc.) history.

Photographs and Sources on Women’s Dress Pre-Oil:

The idea that women in the UAE did not wear the ‘*abaya* before the formation of the nation is reinforced by many of the photographs below. These photographs are taken from Instagram accounts devoted to preserving Emirati history. It is not clear to whom the accounts belong, although it appears that they are individual initiatives by Emiratis who are interested in documenting Emirati history. Their photos depict different aspects of Emirati life pre-oil, but only selected photographs clearly showing women’s dress are shown here. All the Instagram accounts, except for one, have thousands of pictures from the pre-oil era, mostly of sheikhs and people from the ruling family, as well as of men, who were naturally more photographed than other segments of the population at that time. The photographs showing women are much fewer and were curated for the purposes of this paper. Based on the photographs in these accounts, it is expected that the account holders were particularly interested in documenting Emirati history in general, regardless of what people wore. The only exception is the Instagram account by banatzayed, which is devoted

¹⁴ Khalaf, 2005, *ibid*, p. 245.

¹⁵ Ola Salem, “FNC member Worries Custom of Wearing Emirati Dress is Eroding,” *The National, UAE*. 7 January 2014. <http://www.thenational.ae/uae/government/20140107/uae-dress-code-fnc-member-worries-custom-of-wearing-emirati-dress-is-eroding>.

¹⁶ Hobsbawm, 1983, *ibid*, p.1.

¹⁷ Onley, 2004, pp. 77-78.

¹⁸ Reem Elmutwalli, *Sultani, Traditions Renewed: Changes in Women's Traditional Dress in the United Arab Emirates During the Reign of Shaykh Zāyid bin Sultan Āl Nahyān, 1966-2004*, Abu Dhabi Authority for Culture and Heritage: 2011.

¹⁹ Anna Zaharias and Nick Leech. “UAE National Dress is a Living Tradition.” *The National: UAE*. 3 April 2014 <http://www.thenational.ae/uae/uae-national-dress-is-a-living-tradition#full>.

²⁰ Elizabeth Shimek, “The Abaya: Fashion, Religion, and Identity in a Globalized World”, *Lawrence University Honors Projects*, 12 (2012), p. 5-6, <http://lux.lawrence.edu/luhp/12>.

to lifestyle in the UAE (restaurants, news, events...etc.).²¹ Banatzayed's posts are rarely on history documentation, and their posts which depicted Emirati life in the past were particularly focused on what women wore, as can be seen in the descriptions of the photographs below. Social media may play a role in identity formation, but investigation of whether these accounts helped to create ideas about national dress is a topic for further research outside the scope of this study.

Social media is being used in this study as a source of historical information. Photographs such as these are not easily available elsewhere, nor are they found curated in one place. While the national narrative depicts the *'abaya* as a vital aspect of Emirati identity and history, the photographs show that this is not the case. In fact, the photographs show that it was the *burqa*, worn by all women in the photographs, which was an essential part of every-day Emirati life. In figure 7, the photo on the left states: "an old photograph by the same photographer [Eve Arnold] from the 1970s, showing Emirati women dressed in modest Emirati dress, and showing the Emirati woman's interest in wearing colorful clothes and Arabic gold. Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan [the founding father of the UAE], God rest his soul, also appears in the photo."²² The photo caption on the right in figure 7 states: "a photograph of one of the women attending Sheikh Mohammad bin Rashid's and Sheikha Hind al Maktoum's wedding in 1979." Both photographs are described as having been taken in 1970s UAE. Women are shown wearing the *burqa* but not the *'abaya*.

The caption on the left in figure 6 reads: "a family from Sharjah with a doctor from the Trucial Scouts in a health center belonging to the Trucial Scouts in Sharjah, in the mid-1960s." In this photo, one woman is covering her clothes completely with the black cloth that she uses on her head, while the two others are wearing a traditional dress unconcealed by the *shaila* on their heads. On the right, the photo caption reads: "the *mutawa'a* (a teacher) for male and female students of the Quran in Dubai overlooks the celebrations after students memorize the Quran and do *tajwid* [proper pronunciation of the Quran]. The photo was taken in 29 March, 1959."²³ Here, the black *shaila* on the woman's head shows clearly and is sheer, showing the hair and clothes underneath it. The same is true of the *burqa* in figure 7.

In figure 9, the top left caption reads: "a woman with her children in Al Dhana mountains in the Western region of Abu Dhabi in 1968." Here, the boys are wearing skull caps that are markedly different from the white ones worn today, and the woman with a *burqa* is not wearing a *'abaya*. The top right caption reads: "women sitting on the floor to sell their vegetables in the vegetable market during the early sixties of the last century." Here, women are wearing what is considered traditional, Emirati dress under their *'abayas*. The bottom left caption reads: "a girl plays on the accordion in her traditional clothes in one of the girls' schools in Abu Dhabi in 1976." The girl is wearing a *burqa* and a traditional dress, but with no *'abaya*. The bottom right caption reads: "Maitha Mubarak al Mansoori sharpens her son, Khalid's, pencil. The tent was used as a classroom in the Western region of Abu Dhabi in 1956. The photo is from a history book and was used in the "year of learning" in Abu Dhabi." Here, the woman is wearing a *burqa*, a traditional dress, and a long *shaila* (which shows part of her hair, as is the commonly the case today) that does not cover her traditional dress.

²¹ <https://www.instagram.com/banatzayed/> (private account, permission granted).

²² Image accessed 19 December 2016: https://www.instagram.com/p/_9UkS1wEVt/ (private account, permission granted).

²³ Image accessed 19 December 2016: <https://www.instagram.com/p/BEjeE1KB0gT/>.

Authenticity and Differentiation from Foreigners:

National dress is viewed as an authentic representation of Emirati (or Gulf) culture, one that denotes a pure society unmarred by foreign influences.²⁴ GCC citizens endorse the national narrative regarding national dress because it is one way for them to present their culture as authentically Emirati/Qatari/Omani/etc., and to differentiate themselves from foreigners in their countries.²⁵ In the eyes of Emiratis, national dress asserts that they have maintained their pre-oil traditions in the face of modernization and a large population of foreign residents.²⁶ Indeed, Longva states that Kuwaitis define themselves in comparison to the internal foreigners within their countries (rather than those outside).²⁷ National dress signals to fellow citizens, as well as foreign residents that the person wearing national dress has more privileges and may be regarded as superior to the foreigners in that society.²⁸ However, the fact remains that Emirati women are using the 'abaya, rather than the *burqa*', to showcase their connection to their history and a deep-rooted culture.



Figure 7: Instagram/banatzayed

²⁴ Kanna, 2011, ibid.

²⁵ Kanna, 2011, ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Longva, 1997, ibid.

²⁸ Kanna, 2011, ibid; Longva, 1997, ibid.



Figure 8: Instagram/banatzayed (private account, permission granted, accessed 19 December 2016)



Figure 9: Instagram/emirates_date and Instagram/emiratesbooks/ (accessed 19 December 2016)

Inventing a Standardized Dress:

The GCC states are relatively young, most of them having gained independence less than fifty years ago. They are also surrounded by turbulent Arab countries, many of which are currently unstable. National identity is therefore essential for promoting national cohesion and loyalty to the state, especially amid stormy surroundings and neighbors. To ensure that those of different tribes, or those of different ethnicities, feel first and foremost loyalty to the nation, the Gulf states endorse a message of unity (“we are all one”). This usually features an endorsement of a single, national narrative to ensure the “unity” of all citizens.²⁹ While national narratives may differ from state to state in the GCC, what remains similar is the homogeneity of this narrative, wherein each of these nations is often represented as ethnically and culturally homogeneous. The “pure Arab” (i.e. homogenous, untouched by other cultures) story dominates the narrative of these nations, while the local Ajami, Baluch and East African cultures and histories are generally disregarded.³⁰ Indeed, Neil Patrick argues that the Gulf states long overlooked local diversity and represented their states with an exclusivist, pure-Arab, Bedouin narrative.³¹ Similarly, James Onley has found that not only the GCC states, but GCC nationals themselves, often attempt to downplay diversity within their local cultures.³²

To create an image of one, shared history and culture (one that is usually associated with a pure-Arabness), much of the culture promoted within the national narrative is also newly reinvented. Scholars such as Khalaf, John Fox, Nada Mourtada-Sabbah and AlMutawa have discussed these forms of heritage reinventions, explaining that activities such as camel-racing or the building of an Islamic, cultural capital (in Sharjah) have been removed from their original context and reinvented to create a certain national narrative of cultural authenticity.³³ Similarly, national dress in the UAE and many parts of the Gulf has also been reinvented and standardized to portray a homogeneous society deeply rooted in a single history. While what people traditionally wore in different parts of the Arab Gulf varied depending on family, ethnic background, occupation and region, the national dress promoted in many of the Gulf states today is standard and uniform, not representing any of the local diversity within these states. Kanna states that the Gulf national dress today is derived from *Najdi* (i.e.: Bedouin) culture and represents the current Arabization of the region from the multiethnic society of the pre-oil era.³⁴ Persian headdresses have indeed become obsolete in the UAE, replaced by the Najdi/Bedouin headdress. To give a

²⁹ Rana AlMutawa, “Monolithic Representations and Orientalist Credence in the UAE,” *Gulf Affairs*, Autumn 2016. http://www.oxgaps.org/files/analysis_almutawa.pdf.

³⁰ James Onley, “Transnational Merchant Families in the Nineteenth and Twentieth-Century Gulf” in *The Gulf Family: Kinship and Politics*, edited by Alanoud Alsharekh (London: Al Saqi Books and London Middle East Institute SOAS, 2007). SOAS Middle East Issues, pp. 37- 56. James Onley, “Transnational Merchants in the Nineteenth-Century Gulf: The Case of the Safar Family”, in *Transnational Connections and the Arab Gulf*, edited by Madawi Al-Rasheed (London, New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 59-89. Aisha Bilkhair, “Afro-Emirati: A Unique Historical Experience”. UNESCO: 2006 www.portal.unesco.org/culture/en/files/38499/122910030955.Afro-Emirati.pdf 5. Afro-Emirati.pdf AlMutawa, 2016, *ibid*.

³¹ Neil Patrick, “Nationalism in the Gulf States”, *LSE Kuwait Programme on Development, Governance and Globalization in the Gulf States*, (2009).

³² Onley, 2007, *ibid*, 49; Onley, 2005, *ibid*, p. 62.

³³ Suleyman Khalaf, “Poetics and Politics of Newly Invented Traditions in the Gulf: Camel Racing in the United Arab Emirates”, *Ethnology*, 39 (3) (2000), pp. 243-261. John Fox, Nada Mourtada Sabbah and Mohammed al Mutawa, “Heritage Revivalism in Sharjah”, in *Globalization and the Gulf*, edited by John Fox, Nada Mourtada Sabbah and Mohammed al Mutawa (New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 266-287.

³⁴ Kanna, 2011, *ibid*, Kindle e-book locations 1650, 1657.

brief example, one can compare the men's *dishdasha* today (in figures 3 and 4), with the variety of men's dress in the pre-oil Emirates (in figure 10). It is important to note that the *dishdasha*, as it appears today, was also worn by men in the pre-oil Gulf, and there are many photos from the sources used in this paper that show that this is the case. However, the photographs of men wearing something other than the *dishdasha* demonstrate that diversity did exist.

In figure 10, the first photo on the left is captioned: "a picture of Hajj Ahmad Aqeel Al-Arshi Al-Bastaki during the 1920s, he was invited in a letter by the ruler of Sharjah to visit Sharjah. Hajj Ahmad Aqil AlArshi's family are related to the Qawasim [rulers of Sharjah and Ras al Khaimah today]; his brother Farouq Aqil AlArshi married the daughter of Sheikh Mohammed bin Khalifa al Qassimi, who was one of the last rulers of Lanjah from the Qawasim in Bur Faris [the area where Arabs lived in what is now Iran]. Hajj Ahmad's and Hajj Farouq AlAqil AlArshi are considered among the richest of the rich in Dubai and the Arab Gulf. In the 20th century, their trade spanned Karachi, Bombay, Bahrain and Paris, and they own palaces in Bahrain, Karachi, Bombay, Dubai and Paris."

The center caption in figure 10 reads: "the renowned pearl merchants (*tawaawish*) in Dubai examining a collection of individual pearls to sell in Bahrain and Bombay in India. On the left of the picture is Mirza Mohammad Al-Sayegh, and on the right of the photo is Hajj Ibrahim al Fardan, one of the most renowned pearl merchants in Dubai and the Arab Gulf. He used to sell individual pearls to the biggest international jewel companies that used to design the queen of Britain's jewelry. The photo was taken between 1952 and 1954." The right-hand caption in figure 10 reads: "a child from the Western region of Abu Dhabi with her father in 1962, in ADCO's [Abu Dhabi Company for Onshore Oil Operations's] camp."



Figure 10: Instagram/emirates_date and Instagram/emiratesbooks/ (accessed 19 December 2016)

These photographs depicting Emiratis show some of the clothes men used to wear in the pre-oil Emirates. In all these three photos, the clothes and headdress are quite different from the standardized national dress worn today. In the third photo, it appears that the man is wearing a shirt and a *wizar*.³⁵

Historical Memory:

Before embarking on a discussion of Emiratis' imaginings and memories of the pre-oil era, it is important to briefly mention Kanna's discussion on historical memory in Dubai. Kanna argues that nostalgic memories of a close-knit, family-oriented, socially conservative and homogeneous pre-oil Emirati society are more modern than traditional or authentic. Many of the images that represent pre-oil society are romanticized, modern constructions created in response to perceived threats from Westernized lifestyles.³⁶ Thus, while historical memories may contain historical truth, they may equally contain fabrications or be selectively recounted.

In my own experience as an Emirati instructor of Emirati undergraduate students, I have found that students' imaginings of Emirati history are confined to depictions in official national narratives. When asked to discuss what Emirati identity, cultures and traditions are, the first comment that usually came up in class discussion is the '*abaya* and *dishdasha* – the national dress problematized in this study. National dress was viewed as a very important aspect of identity because it represented cultural authenticity and viewed as a deeply-rooted aspect of Emirati history. It appeared as though students were not aware that the '*abaya* was not commonly worn by Emirati elders in the pre-oil years. When discussing the '*abaya* versus the *burqa*', however, some students recounted that their grandmothers did not wear the '*abaya*, but rather the sheer black *shaila* (depicted above) and the *burqa*', during the pre-oil days. Yet even with that knowledge, and even after viewing the above photographs, my students insisted that the '*abaya* (and ironically not the *burqa*'), is an integral part of Emirati traditions and identity: they explained that women were not dressed in '*abayas* in the photos because they were attending a wedding, implying that the women would be wearing them otherwise.

Yet Emirati women today would still be wearing their '*abaya* in public if they were attending a wedding as opposed to the women in the photographs, and would only take it off inside the wedding hall. Students wanted to connect the '*abaya* not only with Emirati identity today, but also with Emirati heritage and history. This connection with pre-oil life signifies to Emiratis that national dress is authentic and pure. The connection also stresses that local cultures and traditions are intact despite the rapid modernization of the nation and the fact that Emiratis are a minority in their own country. Although dress is connected to religion for many students (the '*abaya* being a modest and religiously approved form of dress), the fact remains that other modest and loose fitting outfits that cover all of the hair and body are still not seen to depict Emirati identity and traditions. Noor al Qasimi states that in the Gulf, the importance of veiling owes more to symbolism than religion, arguing that many people feel a strong connection to the '*abaya* because of the national narrative and societal values.³⁷ However, my students often stated that the '*abaya* is important because it is a religious dress. Furthermore, none of the students found the *burqa*' to be an

³⁵ *Wizar*, men's clothing, tied around the waist and reaching the ankles. It is worn as an undergarment today under the dishdasha in some Gulf states, but was worn by itself by some in the pre-oil era, for example, by fishermen.

³⁶ Kanna, 2011, *ibid*, Kindle e-book location 1519, 1565-1619.

³⁷ Al-Qasimi, Noor. 2010. "Immodest Modesty: Accommodating Dissent and the 'Abaya-as-Fashion in the Arab Gulf States." *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, 6(1).

important aspect of Emirati identity today, although all women in the photos wore it. While they understood it as a vital part of Emirati tradition, it was only associated with the past, or with older women, and had no relation to their identity today. Indeed, this is matched by the national narrative that only depicts older women wearing the *burqa*, but never younger women, unlike the photographs in this study.

It is also significant to recount the way older women talk about national dress. The *'abaya* has become an integral part of dress for older women today, including by those who also wear the *burqa*. These women themselves would not be seen in public without the *'abaya* today, even if they did not wear it before the oil boom. They also often negatively view women who do not wear the *'abaya* (although this view does not apply to women who did not wear it in the pre-oil era). Today's national dress seems to have come to represent Emirati culture and traditions to the older generation as well. An analogous account can be seen in women's discussions of dress in Kuwait today. My Kuwaiti relatives' circle of friends allowed me to access similar discussions. Photographs of women wearing miniskirts and beehives were not uncommon in the 1960s Kuwait. During that time, few women wore the veil, and Kuwaiti society was influenced by the secular waves coming from Egypt and the Levant. Today the situation is markedly different, with many women wearing the veil, and less societal acceptance of what some may consider being revealing clothing (miniskirts are hardly worn anymore). Many of the women who wore these miniskirts in the 1960s are veiled today, as are their daughters. The way they discuss women's dress is striking. For example, many of them say that they wore miniskirts previously because they "didn't know better," because people "did not know their religion well enough then," or because "it was different before." The very women who wore miniskirts in the 1960s might critique young women who do the same today. Thus, what they wore in the not-so-distant past is dismissed. Similarly, in the UAE, historical aspects of local dress are dismissed in favor of national dress today, which has come to represent "traditional" Emirati dress, cultures and traditions. Additional investigations of the processes of historical memory and changes in perceptions of tradition are required to further understand this topic.

Conclusion:

What has become important in forming national identities is therefore what is *represented* as a fundamental part of culture and heritage within state depictions of identity, history and culture. The national narrative that propagated the *'abaya* as a vital piece to Emirati identity has successfully placed national dress as the epitome of being an Emirati. The national narrative presents a very uniform and standardized conception of national dress, one which does not represent the diversity that traditionally existed within these societies. Identity, culture and heritage are ever-changing, as evidenced by the present depiction of the *'abaya* rather than the *burqa* as the pillar of Emirati identity. However, for those who are concerned with the perceived loss of tradition, this fact seems to go unnoticed. In their depictions of national dress, they imply that local attire has never changed, and should never change. This attitude is shared by many, which shows the extent to which constructed national narratives are shaping people's perceptions about national identity.