

Dubai cosmopolis

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Created 2007-04-18 23:00

As the images of planes crashing into the twin towers of New York's World Trade Center were relayed across the world on 11 September 2001, throngs of shoppers stopped to watch this spectacle on the television monitors of Dubai's many malls. Surrounded by American fast-food outlets, and clutching just-bought items of American fashion like the baseball caps that are worn with Arab robes, these spectators cheered as if they were American fans watching a sporting event. What did this celebration mean for the prosperous citizens of the United Arab Emirates, a country that is not only an American ally but in love with American commodities and culture? A country where Twin Towers and World Trade Centers continue to be built, looking now like the growing children of a fallen parent?

Whatever the reasons for their unseemly cheering as the events of 9/11 unfolded on television, the shoppers of Dubai were not manifesting anti-American sentiments because of their economic deprivation, nor out of hatred for the west. They were not even motivated by Arab or Islamic politics, since that now familiar entity, the "Arab street", does not in fact exist in Dubai. Like other members of the United Arab Emirates ([UAE \[1\]](#)), this wealthy principality has a resident population that is overwhelmingly non-Arab, also possessing therefore a substantial non-Muslim component. So perhaps what happens in Dubai should be judged by the city's very lack of Arabs and Muslims, which is perhaps why its citizens celebrated 9/11 in the way they did, as the vicarious members of a virtual community. Indians are the real national majority in Dubai, accounting for some 66% of its population, and are alone in occupying every rank in its society.

Emiratis themselves only comprise some 10% of their country's populace, though by law they dominate all public-sector enterprises there. Yet even the Arab domination of Dubai's public sector is due to an unusual policy of "emiratisation" or affirmative action for the ruling minority, whose standards of living have been in relative decline over the last few years. Lacking the educational background and professional qualifications of the foreign experts who manage their country, let alone the skills of the labourers and technicians who make it function, Emiratis are now being reserved positions in private sector enterprises as well. Though they do not possess the numbers to displace foreigners from either public or private sector, Emiratis can no longer afford to live on state subsidies or on fees paid to be the local partners of foreign companies. It has also become clear that the presence of many successful businessmen among the Emiratis is no substitute for a ruling race, one whose dominance must be secured by quotas, and whose purity safeguarded by restrictions on intermarriage.

While the travails of this ruling minority are curious enough, much more interesting is the society they are part of. What does it mean that the most vibrant part of the middle east, in economic terms at least, is not in fact middle eastern? This paradoxical situation, or rather the novel society it brings to light, makes Dubai far more intriguing than its wealth or vulgarity might suggest. For it reveals to us one of the few societies not founded upon nationality. With a small number of locals outnumbered many times over by a large number of outsiders, most of whom

are barred from becoming citizens of the UAE, the nation-state remains nothing but a mirage in Dubai's desert. The implications of this astonishing fact are far-reaching, and inform everything from the role of Islam to that of global capitalism in the region.

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Also by Faisal Devji on openDemocracy:

"Spectral voices: al-Qaida's world wide web [4]"(19 August 2005)

"Osama bin Laden's message to the world [4]" (21 December 2005)

**"Back to the future: the cartoons, liberalism, and global Islam [4]"
(13 April 2006)**

**"Between Pope and Prophet [4]"
(26 September 2006)**

The spirit of capitalism

Dubai's cosmopolitanism rivals that of New York or London, the difference being that it is the local who's an exception here rather than the foreigner. But the privileges of Emirati citizenship can never become grounds for nationalist hysterics and xenophobia, as they sometimes do in Europe and America. Being itself a minority phenomenon, nationalism here cannot pitch itself against other minorities. Despite its huge numbers of immigrants, therefore, immigration as such is a non-issue in Dubai. However strong local feeling might be against the role that the United Kingdom and United States are playing in Afghanistan and Iraq, for example, the tens of thousands of Englishmen and Americans who live here have never become targets of general hostility. This is because nationality does not provide the basis for society in the UAE (see Faisal Devji, "Welcome to Dubai, the society that capitalism built [5]", *Financial Times*, 5 February 2007).

Despite the regulations it imposes to give the impression of a national culture, Dubai plays host to what is possibly the most diverse society [6] in the world. This was brought home to me on my frequent visits to Jumeirah Beach, whose clear waters get saltier by the day as desalination plants providing the city with its water continue to dump the salt they extract back into the Gulf - which is also where the fresh water thus produced is held in submarine reservoirs. All day until late afternoon the beach is populated by white-skinned sun-worshippers from places like Europe and north America. From about five in the evening it draws increasing numbers of Indians and Iranians, Pakistanis and Filipinos, Bangladeshis, Sri Lankans and Arabs who're more interested in maintaining a lighter complexion. Women veiled in black from head to foot mingle with those in the skimpiest of bikinis, while Frenchmen in thongs bob alongside Afghans dressed in tunics and baggy trousers. Egyptian youths form human pyramids in the water, as if from some atavistic impulse, and Russians chat to each other while floating in circles. And in all this no language or ethnicity predominates.

The Arab culture that is meant to give national form to a place like Dubai exists mostly in the form of advertising and commodities. It is to be found in the guise of leisure and entertainment, from *shisha* bars to desert safaris, whose designers, builders and consumers are generally foreigners. Similar is the use of Arabic in public life. From announcements on Emirates Airlines to street signs, Arabic serves as an exotic backdrop to the babble of Urdu, Russian, Persian and

Tagalog that are the true languages of Dubai. Though it is possible to make one's way in the city using Hindi alone, there is only one common language here, English, which even local Arabs must use in their daily interactions with Chinese shopkeepers, Indian teachers and Iranian dentists. And rather than being diminished by the foreigner's length of residence in Dubai, this diversity is only compounded there, since even schooling is provided the children of migrant workers and expatriates according to British, Indian, Australian or Pakistani standards.

Given the fragility of national culture, it is Islam that lends moral and legal substance to the UAE. This is manifested in disparate ways like banning alcohol and pork products for Muslims and pornography for everybody, forbidding the missionary activity of religions other than *Sunni* Islam and legitimating certain legal decisions by reference to the *sharia*. Rather like the Church of England, Islam is the state religion of the UAE, though professed in its official form by a minority of the country's residents. Unlike the Anglican church, however, Islam replaces rather than defines national history in Dubai. This is evident from the city's religious architecture [7], with so many of its mosques built to imitate those from other Muslim lands, that I'm inclined to think the emirate's only distinctive religious environment is the shopping-mall. To hear the call to prayer broadcast amidst the glass and marble of upmarket European shops, with American fast-food outlets set alongside prayer rooms, is surely a distinguishing feature of the Gulf.

State-supported Islam functions like an iron mask meant to conceal the lack of a face, which is why not a single refinement in religious thinking, culture or practice has emerged from the UAE. In this respect Dubai is not the successor of medieval Baghdad, Cairo or Cordoba. There are, however, many attempts to make money from Islam in a global market where Dubai competes with countries like Malaysia, which is trying to corner the global market for *halal* food by patenting its standardisation and certification on the model of kosher food. While Malaysia is rushing to become a "*halal* hub", Dubai is competing with London to become the hub for another moneymaking enterprise called Islamic banking that is estimated to be worth hundreds of billions of dollars. This offshoot of a mythical discipline called Islamic economics emerged during the dictatorship of Zia ul-Haq [8] in Pakistan, as part of his effort to legitimise his rule in Islamic terms while gaining Saudi backing at the same time.

Founded by Pakistanis but now disseminated by big business the world over, Islamic banking [9] is motivated on the one hand by perfectly genuine concerns over ethical investments and market practices, including abstaining from deals involving the manufacture or sale of alcohol and pork products. All this is quite in tune with the kind of ethical investment schemes already available in the west. On the other hand Islamic banking means abstaining from usury, incorrectly but popularly defined as interest. Of course it is impossible to operate in a capitalist market without either taking or giving interest at some level, so a great many euphemisms and often tortuous evasions are required to hide this fact, often to the financial detriment of those purchasing such *sharia*-compliant services - though of course to the benefit of its vendors.

Islam is in fact as modern as anything else in Dubai [10]. Or rather Islam is more modern than anything else in the emirate, because like other religions it is the first institution to adopt new technologies and make itself at home in them. But of course it will survive long after these novelties have disappeared. One needs look no further than the veil that has fascinated and repulsed the west for so long to see how this happens. Unlike the *burqas* and *chadors* worn by poor women in other parts of the Muslim world, it is clear that its various forms, like the *abaya*, worn in the UAE are statements of fashion as much as anything else. Not only is there a plethora of changing styles for what might appear at first glance to be a standard garment, but veils are also very obviously part of an economy of seduction.

Emphasising as they do the body's visible extremities, such clothes are often worn by women with heavily made-up eyes, painted lips, bright nail polish, hennaed hands or feet and

eye-catching footwear. Veils allow these parts of a woman's body to become fetishes, and indeed there is nothing so overpoweringly feminine as the heavily perfumed, painted and jewelled Muslim woman to be found strolling the corridors of Dubai's many shopping-malls [11]. But then veils have been the garments of seduction for centuries, with a vast literature dedicated to their allure. It is this, rather than any misogynist prescription of modesty or invisibility, that accounts for their enduring popularity in certain quarters.

In any case the habit is a sign of modernity not tradition, because it has put an end to the physical segregation of the sexes by allowing women to move about in relative freedom enveloped in their own cocoons of privacy. Indeed the veil permits its wearer to do things that many unveiled women would find impossible, like holding hands with their husbands in public or mingling with half-naked men at the beach. And of course what lies under the veil is often the most daring of European fashion. Instead of the familiar western distinction between a secular appearance in public and a religious one in private, we find the reverse in Dubai, with tradition signified in public and modernity in private. Instead of being kept at arm's length or reserved for the outside world, the west becomes the most intimate part of a Muslim woman's inner life.

Love's labour lost

Rather than seeing all this as some failure of modernity, the elimination of nationhood as a basis for identity, as well as the capitalisation of religion as a replacement for it, might be viewed as the portent of a global future. For Dubai is the closest thing to a society organised by relations of capital. It is the nearest approximation of the urban and island communities that served as models in the early days of capitalism, from Thomas More's Utopia [12] to Daniel Defoe's Robinson Crusoe. Unlike these model communities, however, Dubai exists as a temporary home for most of its residents, who therefore repatriate the money they earn from a country that will rarely grant them citizenship. New laws giving permanent residence to those who buy property have been designed to lure a certain class of person and investment here, but these are the very people who will flee Dubai at the first sign of trouble, and who are unlikely in any case to invest in the public welfare of its residents. The emirate's financial success is built, paradoxically, upon capital flight not capital investment.

Because it is temporary, investment in Dubai is about short-term exploitation without much regard to social or ecological consequences, as so many of the emirate's grandiose building projects illustrate. What has resulted is the façade of a city, the urban version of a Potemkin village, much of which seems to be made out of cardboard. It is only in the older and poorer parts of Dubai that a genuine urban life can be glimpsed, in which pavements exist on which people walk and local businesses rather than international chains operate. Not that there is anything traditional about this, since old Dubai [13] is as temporary as its younger sibling. It's just that the world of the clerk, labourer, petty merchant and shady operator has more autonomy and therefore creativity than that of the professional linked to an increasingly homogeneous corporate culture. The new city [14] is a kind of Disneyland, full of pretend urbanity and even pretend infrastructure like the enormous and expensive system of roads, which are not only choked with traffic and populated by maniacal drivers, but also badly designed despite their beautiful quality.

Befitting a capitalist paradise, the UAE has a reputation for bad labour practices, with maids from the Philippines immured by their employers, and construction workers from Bangladesh labouring under harsh conditions. Recently there have been a number of disruptive protests by labourers who block highways, destroy company property or hold a manager hostage when they are not paid wages or deprived of water and electricity in the stifling desert camps where they are housed. These latter tend to be made up of hundreds of flimsy cabins, each one crowded with three or more workers, which have a tendency to burn down taking the lives and

possessions of their inhabitants with them. Conditions at the workplace [15] tend to be just as bad, with many injured and killed in accidents.

In these situations the government steps in promising to check conditions and impose penalties, though what they in fact do is act as mediators between management and labour. Companies are rarely if ever prosecuted even when they forcibly detain and beat their workers - who are rescued by police only to be deported. The UAE's labour regulations [16] are routinely flouted and insufficiently policed. So even when companies do observe the law requiring a three-hour rest period for those working outdoors during the intensely hot summer, they sometimes release their employees onto the streets, where they may be found lying on grassy verges in their hundreds, as if stupefied by temperatures soaring well above a hundred degrees.

While strikes are forbidden the "temporary" workers who form the overwhelming majority of Dubai's labour, they seem to be occurring more and more, and now even among white-collar workers. The days of cheap and unregulated labour may in fact be coming to an end [17], because of a more assertive workforce as well as rising wages and opportunities in their home countries. But if labour practices in the UAE are still bad enough to drive the International Labour Organisation (ILO) to distraction, this has little to do with any local tradition of exploitation. Indeed most of the companies involved in violations are based in countries with strong workers' rights, and the managers in charge of labourers in Dubai are rarely locals. Even when it is a UAE company in charge of one of the gigantic, some would say megalomaniacal, building projects in the emirate, the actual work is sub-contracted to European or South Korean businesses, so that it is very difficult to determine where responsibility lies. From management to labour, everything here is outsourced.

It remains to be seen if government plans [18] to create some kind of collective organisation representing labourers will be address the mounting problems that it recognises in this sector of the economy. But whether they are for labour or for capital, laws and rights in the city [19] are not phrased in the terms of national unity. Freed from cant about the greater good, workers and management here have recourse to a language beyond citizenship. It is not the greater good of the nation, but the good of the individual, as much as of humanity, that is invoked here. The kind of language that characterises relations of all kinds in Dubai is one that is private instead of public, particular instead of general and religious instead of secular. Even when the state intervenes to affirm the right of one or another of its subjects, it does so not to represent some national will, which indeed it cannot, but as an arbiter possessing its own very particular judgement.

The state's judgment has little to do with neutrality, not because it is biased in some way, but because the emirate is unable to function as a third party at all. It is instead the first among equals as far as the great interests of Dubai are concerned. As owner, partner or large investor in almost all the big private companies that make their home here, the state acts as one owner, partner and investor among others. While this is not a phenomenon unique to Dubai, it has achieved an unprecedented success here, such that it is difficult to tell where the public sector ends and the private begins. This means that the state actually ends up competing with its own subjects - undercutting rival businesses or buying them out, rather than providing a congenial site for their work. It is, therefore, predator as much as protector of its subjects.

As the most powerful private interest in a society of such interests, the state presides over a marketplace rather than a country. It is not surprising, then, that this city should be the capital of other societies without states. Somalia, for instance, which has been without a government for more than a decade, is even more of a marketplace than Dubai, though obviously a much poorer one. Like other African cities, Mogadishu [19] is supplied with goods largely through the emirate. More than this, Dubai actually provides the base for Somalia's airlines and banking, so

that we might say Somalia itself has been outsourced to the UAE to become a business like any other.

Dubai functions as a technocracy rather than a democracy. To call it a monarchy is anachronistic despite a powerful ruling family, which exists as the simulacrum of monarchy. Having been granted their titles by imperial Britain, the rulers of the UAE [20] derive their glamour from the vanished world of the Raj, while in fact working like presidents of corporations. Democracy is misplaced in Dubai, since it is only possible in a community of citizens. But if confining democracy to the small minority of Emiratis is nonsensical, offering citizenship to the country's majority is absurd, as it would entail the creation of a national culture and therefore proscribe the very diversity that makes Dubai possible.

In today's international order democracy means citizenship, citizenship means nationality, and nationality means the creation of a majority. But there is no ethnic, linguistic, religious or even political majority in Dubai, and nor can there be one given its lack of political representation. This makes for a bizarre situation in which demographic majorities and minorities do not translate into majority and minority interests or even consciousness. Though they are the largest national group in Dubai, for example, and probably the only one to occupy every rung of Dubai's class ladder, Indians neither think of themselves as a majority nor behave like one even in ways that are strictly non-political. One finds fewer signs in Hindi or Malayalam here than in London.

Tempests in a teapot

If democratic representation does not characterise political life in Dubai, public opinion certainly does, in the form of newspapers, radio and a welter of professional and community associations. The lively debates through which public opinion in the city are registered are not of course regulated by national interest, though they do sometimes include national loyalties from elsewhere - thus the many letters in the local media by well-paid American expatriates complaining about anti-United States bias. But unchained from the politics of citizenship, even these everyday loyalties luxuriate into strange growths. So the terrorist attacks on Mumbai's commuter trains in July 2006 were followed by at least three letters in one of Dubai's English-language newspapers pointing to the remarkable assistance that the city's residents rendered each other - but only to disprove a *Reader's Digest* poll some weeks previously that had named Mumbai one of the world's rudest cities.

Pakistani and Egyptian taxi-drivers will tell you of the bigotry they have started to experience following the arrival of the most recent group of expatriates: whites from Britain, Australia or South Africa. And highly educated professionals of Indian or Pakistani origin, often themselves British or American citizens, express their shock at the overt racism they face from their new compatriots. But then many of these white expatriates have been imported to Dubai precisely because they are white, and come to hold jobs and enjoy lifestyles here that their class and qualifications would bar them from at home. Their contribution to the city is their colour, which fetches a high price in the bazaar, as white slaves always had in the region because of their rarity. They are, in this sense, the most racial group in the UAE.

Even racism, then, has become an effect of advertising and the market, with members of the master race being mere servants at another level. This is also why racism here is not founded upon a code of silence or denial but forms the subject of lively debate. Rather than have liberal and conservative factions of a dominant ethnic group argue over race relations, with a few minority voices thrown in, as is done in Europe and America, there is no racial majority here, or at least not a dominant one, so the newspapers are full of letters from all sides of the racial divide.

Here is a story from summer 2006. Someone writes to a local newspaper wondering why the city's Lebanese populace seems to have adopted the Brazilian colours as a kind of uniform during the soccer world cup. He suggests that these young men are a rather mercenary lot because they support a strong team only so that they can enjoy a vicarious triumph, something that they are obviously unable to do as Lebanese citizens. In response arrive a number of letters pointing out that since more Lebanese live in Brazil than in Lebanon itself, it makes perfect sense for them to support Brazil. The fact that the first writer did not know this fact, he is told, is because he is an arrogant westerner who takes his ignorance for wisdom. In any case, he is reminded, it is common for people whose national teams are not playing in the world cup to support another.

More common than tales of racial discrimination are the relations of prejudice that structure social life in Dubai. These are often harmless, so the notion that Chinese are hardworking, for instance, is unlikely to effect them negatively in Dubai, just as the perception that Emiratis are lazy is unlikely to disadvantage them either. While everyone everywhere entertains stereotypes about other ethnic groups, these are generally cut across by the language of citizenship - which itself is often racially marked. But without ties of citizenship, only those of contract and prejudice bind as well as separate the disparate groups making up the population of the UAE. Stereotype, in other words, is as much a unifying factor in the city as a divisive one, since in the absence of a common or even a dominant nationality, it provides the only cultural background for social relations there. Prejudices are so highly developed in Dubai that they become signs of intimacy rather than estrangement.

A good illustration is provided by the story of Lebanese fans during the world cup. Exchanges over their allegedly mercenary practice of supporting the stronger team continued for weeks in the newspapers. Once Italy had won the cup, a writer with an Anglo-Saxon name sent in a letter beginning with this sentence: "Congratulations to Lebanon on securing another remarkable World Cup victory. Particularly amazing after being knocked out at the Quarter, then Semi final stage". In response the next day came a letter wondering at the obsession with Lebanese fan behaviour, which was put down to the first writer's shock at no longer being part of a dominant majority: "Maybe because the only place you saw apart from the suburbs of England is Dubai". What struck me about this response was its attribution of English nationality to the first writer. Why not American, Australian or South African? I suspect because his Englishness was derived from his wit.

That prejudice may be the product of knowledge rather than ignorance, and signal intimacy instead of estrangement, is an important point and one repeatedly borne out by the humour and sophistication with which it occurs in Dubai. Witness another exchange of letters. First, a lengthy complaint from "a non British who is tired of people ruining the name of Asians", about a Pakistani couple boarding a flight to England so that the pregnant wife could give birth there and claim benefits. The letter ends with the words: "I can tell you what lazy, ungrateful spongers some of these immigrants can be". The next day's newspaper carried two responses, one from a British "expat for life" who agreed entirely and vowed never to return, and the other by a Pakistani refuting "the Indian person" and ending with: "I think the person must have been referring to an Indian passenger as I believe the security apparatus in India at airports is very lax and the butt of many a joke".

But intimacy comes in many forms, and among these the sexual one enjoys a high profile in this emirate. In a masculine population swollen to an absolute majority by large numbers of migrant male workers, sexual services are bought and sold as well as being forcibly procured. This city, which bans all material deemed pornographic, is nevertheless home to the most bewildering array of prostitutes. From Russian "Natashas" in the seedier hotels of Bur Dubai, to Filipina streetwalkers whose nocturnal pacing is watched by off-work Keralan men with hands wedged

firmly in trouser pockets, sex workers are everywhere. Even shopping-malls, whose air-conditioned passages surely provide Dubai with its true public spaces, accommodate prostitutes who advertise and make assignments by mobile-phone.

Yet the smallest sexual infraction with a "respectable" woman of any class or nationality often meets with swift reprisal, from jail terms to deportation. Indeed if labour practices in Dubai are unlikely to give the ILO much cheer, its laws on sexual harassment are as stringent as any a feminist would wish for. There are news items every other day about men in shops who use the cameras in their mobile-phones to look up women's skirts while supposedly bending to glance at products on bottom shelves. A woman squatting on a public toilet only realised she was being filmed by a camera-phone held above her head when it suddenly rang and she looked up to see an arm being quickly withdrawn.

What is interesting about acts of this kind is that they all have to do with the desire for privacy. Rather than purchasing the services of a prostitute or pornography from the black market, these men are interested in gaining access to some very personal image of privacy that would be adjudged as having little or no sexual content in the market. Though occurring for the most part in shopping-malls, such acts seem opposed to the market in sex and other commodities that makes Dubai what it is. The mobile-phone, which offers a prosthetic intimacy in any case, has simply had its range extended, allowing it to scan a privacy that can never be experienced.

Calling at all ports

Dubai is heir to a long history of free ports, from Zanzibar to Hong Kong. Such places have always provided the junctions along which international capital flowed. The city in fact is only the latest of the many ports that have garnered extraordinary riches in the region's past. It is the successor to Aden, not so long ago a vibrant and cosmopolitan centre that connected India to Britain. These city-states are also essential to the global capital of tomorrow. So Dubai is not only crucial in opening up the ex-Soviet republics of central Asia to business, it is also singularly important to countries already integrated into the global market.

This was brought home to me when I found myself on an Air Tajikistan flight between Delhi and Dushanbe a couple of years ago. The aircraft had originated in Sharjah and was bound for Moscow, so Tajikistan itself was only a pit-stop for its national carrier. What made the connection between these disparate cities possible? Goods from around the world were being re-exported from the UAE to India, central Asia and Russia. Buyers and sellers were moving between countries. And middle-class Indian students shut out from western universities by cost, and from Indian ones by quotas and competition, were travelling in the cheapest way possible from places like the Smolensk Medical Institute to the provincial towns from whence they came.

The importance that a small place like Dubai has for its much larger neighbours is nowhere more evident than in its relations with India. The Persian Gulf provides a huge country like India, Dubai's largest trading partner, with the bulk of its diasporic capital in the form of labour remittances. It also keeps India's national airline financially viable by ferrying these labourers back and forth. More than this the Gulf provides the world's largest film industry, Bollywood, with one of its major markets. And this is not even to mention the fact that many of the sub-continent's crime syndicates operate out of here.

Among other things Dubai serves as the transit point for pirated DVDs and other goods that are not allowed to move legally between India and Pakistan. In this sense it serves to repair the economic links between Mumbai and Karachi, as well as between the Ganges and the Indus, that were severed with the partition of British India in 1947. Indeed given the numbers of

Indians, Pakistanis and Bangladeshis who live here, Dubai has even managed to reproduce the Raj by bringing its dispersed inhabitants to live together as they do nowhere else in the world.

Media attention has focused on Dubai as a place full of marvels, indeed as a modern version of the marvellous East. But it is better viewed as a junction for traffic of all kinds. In this age of closed and patrolled borders, Dubai represents a highly monitored but remarkably open invitation to the world, though not of course an invitation to everyone. This is a city that plans to attract visitors who will outnumber its own shifting population by more than ten times. It lives by re-exporting not only automobiles and electronic goods, but also Russian dancers, Philippine lounge singers and British DJ's, who are now fixtures in every Asian city worth its name.

Along with its Gulf neighbours Dubai even recycles the United States. Thus the fashion of building scaled down versions of the White House, which began in Kuwait after the first Gulf war and was exported throughout the region, as well as to places like Karachi. Here entire neighbourhoods are filled with White House knock-offs, their pediments inscribed with gilded phrases from the Qur'an. But Dubai re-exports itself as much as it does the rest of the world, and may now be found in special economic zones all over the world. Yet the most important thing it recycles is a new kind of global society beyond the reach of nationality.

The future of an illusion

There are those who say the excessive publicity Dubai now receives, as well as its transformation into a destination for mass tourism, signal the end of its moment in the sun of global innovation. The energy and undoubted vision of its rulers in transforming this small port in the long-distance dhow trade crossing the Arabian Sea and Indian Ocean must be acknowledged. From a town catering to pirates and pearl divers, Dubai has become one of the world's richest cities. But it is true that scale and vulgarity appear to be the only things that characterize the emirate's latest developments.

There is nothing innovative about the environmentally destructive and financially risky obsession with tourism, conventions and sports tournaments, all of which would dry up at the first sign of trouble in this volatile region. Even without a war or terrorist incident, however, Dubai cannot remain fashionable for long, since unlike a Paris or a London it has nothing to offer visitors sheer novelty apart, and this too is now entering a blowsy phase. Not all the luxury in the world will prevent fashions from changing and taking the celebrities this city woos elsewhere, followed in short order by the package tourists.

More dangerous is the possibility that Dubai's success today may be putting its future in peril. Quite apart from the threat posed by the spiralling costs of housing and commodities that will eventually reach the all-important labour sector, Dubai's latest fixation, property speculation fuelled by a construction boom, threatens to wipe out every attempt to create other forms of value. For instance eminently worthwhile efforts to make the city a hub for international media, medicine or e-commerce seem not to have borne fruit, with much-hyped projects like Dubai's Media City becoming zones for yet more property speculation.

Similarly, prestigious institutions like Harvard's medical school appear to operate here only as businesses, transferring services for cash rather than knowledge for development. Like upmarket European and American shops in the city's malls that send only their second-rate goods to Dubai, these prestigious institutions seem to be interested only in flogging their least successful products here. But how can it be otherwise given the abysmal quality of so much higher education in Dubai, where a number of plush universities function with ranks of indifferent faculty and students?

Yet it is precisely in sectors like higher education, now a huge growth industry as the establishment of profit-based British and American universities in Dubai demonstrates, that the emirate can take a lead. Dubai might easily become a hub for medicine, technology or design serving not only the entire middle east, but also south Asia and much of Africa. The fact that it has not yet become a centre for such enterprises, not even for publishing or music in the Arabic language, is surely a sign of the real failure behind Dubai's apparent success. For like many of the now-vanished cities of hurried riches before it, Dubai is still stuck in the first phase of an economic miracle and has been unable to entrench its gains at the next one.

Property speculation is the biggest business in Dubai today, and not only has the whole city been transformed into a construction site, but artificial islands in fanciful shapes are also being dredged out of the sea to provide more sites for speculation. Such speculation, of course, is not limited to the UAE, with companies like Emaar now taking on gigantic building projects in Turkey and Lebanon (where it rebuilds Beirut after each war) as well as in Pakistan and India. This is already a big jump from old-fashioned investments in prestige properties abroad, which still continue to buy Dubai financial security as much as political influence in London or New York.

Despite all the talk of economic diversification, the city does not produce value but remains a site for the adding of value. And for all its boasts about an economy that is not based on oil, Dubai depends precisely on cheap oil to keep its economy growing. It is still only a junction after all, and so at the mercy of financial speculators, such that the mere rumour of Saudi Arabia opening up its stock exchange is enough to wipe hundreds of millions of dollars off Dubai's market. While it is an extraordinary city by any measure, Dubai is caught in a time warp with nothing to offer but "bigger, better and more of the same". For innovation in the region we need look no further than Qatar, which changed the world with a single product - [Al-Jazeera](#) [20]a [20]. This is the kind of productivity that should represent the next phase of Dubai's future.

In the everyday lives of its residents Dubai's novelty displays itself as tradition, and it is this taming of the new in habitual acts that gives the city its charm. One would think that such quotidian practices have been going on for centuries, as indeed they have in various forms, even if elsewhere and among other people. One of the most charming moments of Dubai's traditional life comes when dusk falls across the Creek. As neon signs and naked bulbs flicker on in the twilight, the drone of motors heralds the return of Keralan clerks and Punjabi shop assistants, seated in rows on the wooden boats ferrying them home. Not far from where they disembark, the cathedral mosque receives Yemeni and Pakistani worshippers, streaming into its ablution hall while the call to prayer sounds out. And just behind the mosque is a Hindu temple, into which proceed Sindhi and Gujarati women clad in saris, some bearing coconuts and others with handkerchiefs fastidiously tucked in at their waists. Devotees of both faiths mingle briefly before disappearing each into their house of worship.

These humdrum practices are familiar to me from my childhood on the east African coast. If I recognise them here it is not only because Dubai and [Zanzibar](#) [20] partake of the same history but also because such traditions are themselves mobile and not firmly attached to places - having escaped the clutches of national culture thus far. The fact that communities can migrate with their traditions and reconstitute them in different places and among different peoples makes these histories as modern and as flexible as the latest technological habit. For such traditions can coexist with others and include as many strangers as they exclude. It is the possibility of reconstituting everyday practices in this way that keeps them alive, allowing quotidian acts to naturalise the most novel of phenomena. I suspect it is this history of tradition outside the nation-state, rather than any system of governance, that makes Dubai the stable and peaceable society it is, despite the extraordinary transformations it has undergone.

Unlike the conservative role it plays in nation-states, tradition in the UAE functions not to forge a non-existent nationality, but to accommodate and naturalise change. In this sense it is in fact the most modern thing about a place like Dubai. This is a modernity that the official culture of the emirate tries desperately to colonise. My favourite example of such a colonised tradition is camel-racing, surely one of the great symbols of the UAE's Arab past. After receiving a great deal of criticism for the use of kidnapped or indentured child jockeys in this most traditional of sports, Dubai banned the practice only to replace the Indian or Pakistani boys with remote-controlled robots. And so a supposedly archaic custom was transformed into the most high-tech race in the world, one in which the animal element was combined with robotics to produce a cyborg. The use of remote-controlled robots in camel-racing also transforms this sport into a monstrous video game, becoming therefore the perfect example of Dubai's prosthetic modernity.

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