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Struggles Over History and Identity:
"Opening the Gates" of the Kingdom to Tourism

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INTRODUCTION*

This essay is about the politics of tourism. International tourism is at the nexus of global capitalism and national identity, and as such, it provides a powerful vantage point from which to examine the tensions between the imperatives of global capitalism and the protection of domestic jurisdiction. Global capitalism, as articulated by the World Trade Organization (WTO), mandates a free-er flow of information, capital, and people. A part of “opening up” is the promotion of tourism in countries that were previously difficult to access.

Tourism, as a dynamic of capital accumulation, is about creating and marketing experiences, in which place is commodified and reduced to an image for consumption.¹ The production of a national image has internal and external components² and it can be negotiated and revised even as the producers of the dominant image promote its authentic essence. Tourism suggests an invitation to come in and view your self, so it prompts the questions: What image of self is offered for viewing? What representation of self do you want to project?³

These questions are especially provocative in Saudi Arabia where the state seeks, on the one hand, to accommodate global capitalism (by joining the WTO, inviting in investors, and foreign tourists) as it attempts, on the other hand, to forge a national identity that transcends diverse domestic voices (such as Islamism, class, gender and region). In my view, the pursuit of the former exposes tender spots in the pursuit of the latter. The state attempts to project to tourists a homogenized version of “being Saudi” that is consistent with its desire to forge a national identity. As I illustrate, however, the experience of tourism makes evident contested voices over identity issues, through both glaring omissions and muddy edges (or, unintended encounters). My particular interest is in two aspects of tourism: (a) capturing the dominant representation through the official itinerary, choice of sites and museum exhibits, and (b) distilling the muddy edges of controlled tourism, i.e., incidents and observations that were not on the official itinerary.

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¹ Colin Michael Hall, *Tourism and Politics: Policy, Power and Place*, (Chichester: John Wiley and Sons, 1994), p. 194.

² Susan Ossman, “Boom Box in Ouarzazate: The Search for the Similarly Strange,” *Middle East Report*, Sept-Oct 1995, 12-14.

³ This paper is about private international tourism. It does not directly address internal tourism, GGC tourism, or religious travel, al of which are related but likely have different dynamics.

To comprehend tourism, it must be situated in the post-Gulf War political economy of Saudi Arabia. I seek to articulate the rational and material reasons for the promotion of tourism, and to locate its meaning as part of the nationalist project. I make three primary arguments.⁴ First, a particular representation of the founding of the Kingdom and its development over the decades has been constructed, institutionalized and consolidated and is being marketed to foreign audiences even before it is fully accepted (or experienced) by Saudi Arabian citizens. The idealized narrative on “what it means to be a Saudi” is interesting not only for what it does represent, but also for its exclusions, silences and ambiguities. Second, I argue that the muddy edges of controlled tourism expose the internal complexity of Saudi Arabia. At these edges, when the official itinerary went awry, international tourists encounter and contest local voices that seek to define and protect an identity. Examples are numerous and include such incidents as negotiations with mutawwa over covering and photography, the missing igama of a foreign bus driver, frustrations with the severe restrictions on mobility and interaction, and the unintentional exposure to sub-standard housing for foreign laborers. Finally, I argue that one of the unintended consequences of controlled tourism is that the Saudi Arabian state is losing its long-standing control of the external discourse on its development.

The politics of tourism are evident throughout the world; in the Middle East it is certainly so in Egypt, Israel, Jordan and Morocco. What makes Saudi Arabia especially interesting is timing. Saudi Arabians are only now struggling to (re)construct the content of national identity (including citizenship and belonging) quite independently of tourism or the WTO. The coincidence of the two processes provides a fertile field for examining debates over national image. Before I turn to the official and alternative representations, muddy edges, and the developmental discourse, I first establish context through the politics of place and of pace, socio-economic trends, and the cultural markers that tourists imagine.

⁴ The empirical part of this analysis is based on my participation in some of the first Study Tours of Saudi Arabia in January and October 2000. I served as the Study Leader for a private tour group from the United States that traveled under the auspices of a national museum. This analysis is in no way associated with the tour operators, nor does it reflect upon their performance, which was superb in every respect. This is an attempt to grapple with new and complex socio-political issues that emanate from tourism. The author is solely responsible for the views expressed.

OPENING THE GATES TO TOURISM: IMAGE AND IMAGINATION THE POLITICS OF PLACE: THE MEANING OF OPENING

Sandwiched in the travel brochure between ads for trips to the Himalayan Kingdoms of Nepal and Bhutan, a Kenyan Christmas Family Safari and a Summer in Tuscan, the alluring teaser reads: *Saudi Arabia's recent decision to welcome select groups of travelers to the kingdom affords a thrilling opportunity to those seeking a truly unique travel adventure.* In an age of eco-tourism, adventure travel, and culturally sensitive travel, Saudi Arabia is truly one of the last frontiers in international tourism. As a latecomer, Saudi Arabia offers an especially interesting vantage point from which to observe how politics and tourism intersect. The consumption of tourist services cannot be extracted from the social and political relations in which they are embedded.⁵

Tourism has been formally introduced into a country that was previously off limits to private sight-seeing travelers not from the contiguous countries. Saudi Arabia has long received masses of visitors, but the only way to access it was through hajj (religious rituals), visitation of relatives, or employment. For many years, then, Saudi Arabia has hosted internal tourists, GCC visitors, Yemeni travelers, religious pilgrims, and millions of foreign workers. It is not that travel and foreign visitors are new in the country, but that private international tourism is new. It was extraordinarily difficult for a non-GCC foreigner to gain access to the country. In 1991, while still prohibiting tourism, Saudi Arabia sent abroad a fabulous exhibit of its self, entitled "Saudi Arabia: Yesterday and Today." As Susan Slyomovics observed, it conveyed the statement, "You can't come to Saudi Arabia, so we will come to you."⁶

To appreciate the power and significance of the tourism opening, one must comprehend the long-standing regulations against mobility and travel in Saudi Arabia. Every foreigner (approximately 6.2 million, about 1/3 of the total population) is required to be "sponsored" by a Saudi Arabian citizen, who in turn holds legal, financial, and social responsibility for the behavior of the foreigner. This means that sponsorship is extraordinarily difficult to attain except in the case of simple employment or to conduct the religious rituals of the hajj (pilgrimage) in Mecca and Medinah. Foreign workers have had restricted mobility; until summer 2001, they could not travel more than 50 kilometers from their place of residence without the written, signed, and dated permission of their sponsor. This extensive system of regulation and oversight ensured appropriate conduct while in the country. It acted in many ways as an extension of the authoritarian state. Tourist visas did not even exist.

⁵ J. Urry, "The 'Consumption' of Tourism," *Sociology*, 24 (1): 23-35.

⁶ Susan Slyomovics, "Tourist Containment," *Middle East Report*, Sept-Oct 1995, p6.

The introduction of tourism in Saudi Arabia necessitated a major change in this long-standing system of sponsorship and oversight of foreigners in the country. In an early concession to tourism in September 1999, the state approved a plan that allowed Moslems coming to Saudi Arabia to perform umrah (minor pilgrimage) to travel around the country instead of being confined to the holy cities of Mecca and Medinah.⁷ In April 2000, the state announced it would issue tourist visas that allow foreigners access to the country for reasons other than hajj or employment.⁸ While this is a major step in “opening up,” it is not as though the kingdom will be overrun by legions of back-packing college students anytime soon. The new visa will apparently require tourists to travel in the country through a local company that will take charge of the trip in its entirety and will ensure that all tourists leave the country after their visit. The visa will be valid for one month and will be issued only for group entry rather than for individual travel. The visas are so new that during a January 2000 tour, there was still no “tourist visa” box to check off on the airline form. Yet in the first four months of formal availability, between April and July 2000, 6,546 tourist visas had been issued, mainly to tourists from Europe, Japan, and the U.S.⁹

There has been no transition period in which individual travelers or small independent groups negotiated their way through Saudi Arabia. In Egypt, for example, individual travelers choose among their activities. They decide where to stay, what to eat, which sites are worthy of their time, what souvenirs to purchase, and how to negotiate the costs of their experience. In contrast, in Saudi Arabia, several government entities have been established to manage such dilemmas about sites, representation, costs, accommodations, and interaction between locals and tourists. There is less individual experimentation in experiencing Saudi Arabia. This means that questions regarding authenticity are not going to be answered slowly over time in a give-and-take process between tourist and local culture; rather, choices must be made up front because of the formal, structured nature of tourism in Saudi Arabia.¹⁰

⁷ “Hotel Operators...”

⁸ *Gulf News*, “Saudi Tourism Will Have Slow Start,” 6 April 2000, and “Saudi Minister Says Sponsorship to be Scrapped,” Reuters, 27 April 2000.

⁹ “6500 Tourists Get Saudi Visas,” Agence France-Presse, 31 July 2000.

¹⁰ On authenticity, which I think will be an important question in Saudi Arabia, see Donald Getz, “Event Tourism and the Authenticity Dilemma, in *Global Tourism: The Next Decade*, William Theobald, ed., (Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann, 1996); S. Lash and J. Urry, *Economies of Sign and Space* (London: Sage Publications, 1994); Erik Cohen, “Contemporary Tourism – Trends and Challenges: Sustainable Authenticity or Contrived Post-Modernity,” in *Change in Tourism: People, Places, Processes*, Richard Butler and Douglas Pearce, eds., (London: Routledge, 1995); John Hutnyk, “Magical Mystery Tourism,” in *Travel Worlds: Journeys in Contemporary Cultural Politics*, Raminder Kaur and John

In Saudi Arabia, it is the state that defines tourism (through representatives of the ruling family working with private Saudi Arabian operators) rather than independent, individual private entrepreneurial citizens. Several members of the al Saud family spearhead the effort to promote tourism. The state favors tourism because it will not only bring in capital, but it may also raise historical consciousness and cultural pride. For now, tourism is tightly controlled and the state is constructing the image to be marketed abroad, to private tourists. The itinerary is highly structured, from which it is impossible to deviate. It is not quite containment tourism or enclave tourism, but it is very much controlled tourism.

THE POLITICS OF PACE: CONFLICT AVOIDANCE

The tourist opening is purposefully slow, cautious and targeted for social and political reasons. A tourism manager for Saudia Airlines said, “The Saudis have received religious traffic and Gulf visitors for hundreds of years. It’s not a new thing. But Saudi tourism will not be for the masses. It will be well-targeted.”¹¹ A travel marketer in Jeddah said, “We want to be more open, but not like Dubai,” and a director of marketing for a resort hotel was also cautious, “...this will happen in small doses in a very controlled way. It should be a gradual transition as we don’t want to shock anyone.”¹² Dubai, in addition to serving alcohol and allowing freedom in dress and mobility, also has a significant trade in prostitution.

Prince Bandar ibn Khaled, who works with tourism in the Asir region, was straightforward about the political implications of tourism, “Hundreds of thousands of people from different cultures could offend the local population without even knowing it.” A public backlash “could delay (foreign) tourism for years.”¹³ For those advocates of tourism, the challenge is to gently promote tourism (and the hoped for accompanying opening of society) while avoiding a crackdown from socially conservative forces. It is a delicate balancing act. In other Middle East countries, the tourist sector has become a rallying point for opposition forces, most notably in Egypt along the Nile River.

Hutnyk eds. (London: Zed Books, 1999), and Hazel Tucker, “Tourism and the Ideal Village,” in Abram, et al.

¹¹ “Saudis Seeking Tourists, Preferably the Well-Off,” Agence France-Presse, Dubai, 11 May 2000.

¹² “Hotel Operators Eye Opportunities in Saudi Arabia,” Dubai, Reuters, 16 May 2000.

¹³ Eileen Alt Powell, “Saudi Tourism: Conservative kingdom is finally opening its door to foreign visitors,” AP, Abha, *Northwest Arkansas Times*, 16 May 1999.

Saudi Arabian officials refer to this as “clean tourism,” travel without the negative circumstances that are often attached to the experience, such as gambling, casinos, alcohol or prostitution. There are, of course, no public entertainment venues, clubs, cinema or dancing.¹⁴ Tour groups will visit archeological sites, historic locations, lakes, festivals and museums. There are plans for eco-tourism, snorkeling in the coral beds of the Red Sea and treks in the Empty Quarter desert. Bedouins are “gearing up to take tourists to desert encampments.” A new hotel and golf course are planned on the sea with a private beach where Westerners can swim.¹⁵ The latter is relevant because it expands the distinction between behavior in the private and in the public space to encompass the tourist trade. Foreign women could wear bathing suits on such a private beach that was designed and maintained strictly for tourists. Such a resort is similar to enclave tourism, but it is unlike enclave tourist development in much of the Third World, where separation is required by the disparity between the wealth of tourists and the poverty of the countries they visit.¹⁶ Saudi Arabia is relatively prosperous, urban and cosmopolitan. Rather, such separation in Saudi Arabia would be prompted by normative preferences.

WHY NOW, WHY TOURISM?

In a region of majestic pyramids, winding suqs, Islamic architecture, and pre-Islamic ruins, Saudi Arabia is clearly a latecomer to tourism.¹⁷ There are really two questions to answer: why tourism, and why now (finally)? The opening of tourism is grounded in the reality of the post-Gulf War political economy. There are rational and material reasons for its recent introduction. The promotion of tourism is part of a larger dialogue about national identity. To introduce it now reflects a new sense of self confidence as a modern nation state and a consolidated national entity. It is a celebration, not only of the past, but of the present and of future hopes. It may also reflect the self-assertion of the regime in the wake of Islamist opposition, serving as an expression the of decreased vulnerability of the regime.

¹⁴ Though a Disneyland-style project, the first in the Middle East, has recently been announced in Riyadh. It will feature Star Wars, Hollywood Studio, and a Wild Wadi boat ride through turbulent waters. *Saudi Press Agency*, 2 January 2001.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Tim Mitchell, “Worlds Apart: An Egyptian Village and the International Tourism Industry,” *Middle East Report*, Sept-Oct 1995, 8-11.

¹⁷ For a critical analysis of tourism in the Middle East, see “Tourism and the Business of Pleasure,” an issue of *Middle East Report* devoted to the subject. September-October 1995, No. 196, Vol. 25, No.5.

The domestic context of the 1990's was difficult for Saudi Arabia both politically and economically. Begun with the turmoil of the Gulf War, the decade was a time of Islamist opposition forces on the ascendancy, illnesses for King Fahd, succession struggles in the al Saud family, and new social problems. Guns, drugs, and crime were increasingly reported in Saudi Arabia. The population continued to grow at an astounding rate of about 3.5% per year. Unemployment figures among Saudi citizens spiraled. Among recent male college graduates, the unemployment rate was at least 30%. Yet there was a continuing dependence on an imported foreign labor force, which constituted about 95% of the private sector force. The once-fabulous infrastructure was deteriorating; this was especially true of schools and hospitals. Oil prices hit a 10-year low in 1998. Income per person had tumbled from \$16,650 in 1981 to \$6526 in 1998. The ratio of public sector debt to GDP was more than 120% in late 1999, the 17th straight year of deficit. Clearly, Saudi Arabia now needs a new source of revenue that buffers the economy from the volatility of oil prices and it needs a new source of employment. The year 2000-01 was also punctuated by strident international criticism of the Saudi Arabian record on human rights. International organizations like Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and even the United Nations all targeted Saudi Arabia for its treatment of women, children, non-Moslems, Shi'a Moslems and foreign labor. There were anti-Israel (and U.S. by association) demonstrations in the country; a Saudi Airliner was hijacked, and the Imam at the Grand Mosque called for jihad against the forces of oppression. A series of car bombs and explosions unsettled the local and foreign population.

By the end of the 1990's, Crown Prince Abdullah had introduced a series of reform measures designed to build confidence in his leadership and foresight. He continued King Fahd's program of deporting illegal foreign workers, doubled visa fees on foreign labor, slashed subsidies on electricity and petrol, and instituted limits on princely prerogatives (use of phone, planes, and electricity). Abdullah established a Supreme Economic Council in order to regulate the shares market, to revamp the tax code, and to amend property and employment law in order to gain membership in the WTO, for which Saudi Arabia had applied in 1993 (when it was still GATT). Its membership application had been adversely affected because, as representatives of the WTO argued, the Saudi Arabian economy was too heavily subsidized and the market too protected. Troublesome issues included the lack of transparency in public procurement, intellectual property rights, investment rules, and tariff rates. In response to these problems, Saudi Arabia announced in 2000 a series of sweeping economic changes intended to facilitate its membership in the WTO.¹⁸

¹⁸ "James Gavin, "Saudi Arabia: All Change," *Middle East Economic Digest*, 25 June 2000.

For the first time, 100% foreign ownership of companies is allowed, foreign companies will have access to favorable loans from the Saudi Industrial Development Fund; foreign investors can invest in the local bourse; the General Investment Authority (GIA) was established as a one-stop shop to issue licenses and to incorporate foreign and joint ventures, and importantly, it appears that the old requirement that all foreigners have a Saudi sponsor will be altered. There is discussion that foreigners will be allowed to own property in Saudi Arabia, that judicial protection will be strengthened and greater public disclosure for investments will be fostered. It is into this ferment and “opening” that busloads of tourists are arriving for the first time ever in Saudi Arabia.

Saudi Arabia seeks to achieve several material objectives through the new promotion of tourism. As a demonstration of openness, it will facilitate application to the WTO. The development of the tourist infrastructure in Saudi Arabia will also increase investment opportunities, attract select groups of foreign visitors, and encourage Saudi citizens to remain in country for their holidays. Unofficial estimates are that Saudi citizens spend more than \$16 billion on vacations abroad annually.¹⁹ Indeed, much of the domestic discussion of tourism states that the emphasis is on internal tourism and on the propagation of Islam. Furthermore, this economic activity will not only create jobs in this growing service sector, but importantly, the jobs that are created will be acceptable positions for the many unemployed Saudis. Two of the primary attributes required of Saudi Arabians who are employed in the tourism trade are a) generosity of hospitality and b) a proud self-image. That is to suggest that the newly-created positions will be compatible with social norms. The decades old effort to Saudiize the economy has been difficult as many positions currently held by foreign labor remain unattractive to citizens (due to pay, structure, incentives, and norms).

A challenge for Saudi Arabia will be to keep money in the country and to circulate the money throughout the various regions and economic sectors. The state and private business community must build backward and forward linkages throughout the economy (in construction, services, agriculture, and transportation) so that Saudi Arabian citizens benefit from the new activity. Tourism must stimulate the local economy, develop capital-producing activity that is independent of oil cycles, and provide acceptable jobs. Unfortunately, experience elsewhere suggests that increasing international integration of the tourist industry decreases the amount of expenditure that stays in the host country. The broad-based relaxation of foreign investment regulations in Saudi

¹⁹ Abdullah al Shihri, “Saudis Establish Tourism Body,” AP, Riyadh, 17 April 2000. Such figures suggest that Saudi Arabia is not simply a receptor destination as is the case for much of the developing world; rather, Saudi Arabians themselves are active travelers elsewhere.

Arabia which has accompanied its application to the WTO will weaken local control over capital. Indeed, four of the six hotels that were utilized included an Intercontinental, Meridien, Sheraton, and Marriott. Under the new WTO-mandated “reforms,” such lucrative operations can now be 100% foreign-owned. It may well be that the economic imperatives of joining the WTO mitigate against the diversification, privatization, and Saudiization of the economy, all long sought after goals in the country.

Many Saudi Arabians want tourism to work, so tremendous resources are being expended. Since 1995, Saudi Arabia has invested \$6.66 billion on tourism projects, mostly geared toward internal tourism (Saudis and citizens from neighboring states of the Gulf Cooperation Council, who do not require visas).²⁰ The tourist infrastructure is most developed in the southwestern province of the Asir, in the resort town of Taif and in Yanbu on the Red Sea, both favored spots for holidays among Saudis and GCC citizens. It remains to be seen whether the needs of tourists from the Arabian Peninsula are similar to those of tourists from farther-flung origins. The state predicts 3 million visitors in the next five years and, once the infrastructure is complete, it expects 1 million tourists per year. There is a new Prince Sultan School for Tourism and Hotel Sciences that opened in Abha to train Saudi Arabian citizens for roles in the tourism sector. At the helm of all of this is Sultan ibn Salman, newly appointed Secretary General of the Higher Organization for Tourism (HOT); Salman al Sudairy assists him. As well, Sultan ibn Abdulaziz is supportive of this venture as Saudia Airlines serves as sponsor of tour groups. The HOT is responsible for tourism policy in the Kingdom. It will evaluate infrastructure, “remove whatever obstacles might hamper tourist activity,” and survey and protect tourist sites and folklore items such as handicrafts, markets, and cottage industries.²¹ They are, thus far, doing a remarkable job.

CULTURAL MARKERS THAT ENTICE

There is nothing exotic, strange or mysterious about either Saudi Arabia or tourism. Yet, in the fertile imagination of tourists, a primary lure to tour Saudi Arabia is the sense that it is somehow shrouded, off-limits, and secretive. Though many of the tourists complained often about the constraints that were placed on them in the country (regarding dress, photography, mobility), I suspect that the restrictive quality is also the same reason they paid for the experience. The perceived slightly taboo nature of Saudi Arabia is a primary attractant to tourism. Pre-trip literature clearly states that all female tourists must wear an

²⁰ *Gulf News* Editorial, “New Challenge for Riyadh,” 8 April 2000.

²¹ “New Council to Promote Tourism,” *Saudi Arabian Embassy Newsletter*, May 2000, Vol. 17-05.

abaya and cover their hair with a scarf for the duration of the trip. Furthermore, all participants are required to sign a waiver that details extreme political restrictions in Saudi Arabia to which they must abide. To my knowledge, no tourist expressed concerns about waiving the right to expression. Image and imagination fertilize each other here, and trips continue to fill at this time. It is not yet clear how long this can be sustained; as more tourists experience Saudi Arabia, the country will indeed be less “shrouded in secrecy.”

The “off-limits” character of Saudi Arabia is utilized as a selling point for the tour by the operators (not by Saudi Arabians). The letter of advertisement notes that, even now, no tourist visa exists for entry to the country; each visitor must be sponsored by an influential Saudi and approved by the royal family. Saudi Arabia was introduced in literature that marketed trips as “mysterious and exotic,” a “blank spot on the map for most travelers.” The pioneering opportunity to be among the first in the door of the country is heralded. The tour “offers a rare chance to explore a country before the imprint of tourism changes it forever.” Clearly, the primary draw is to be first, a pioneer traveler to a previously closed Kingdom, which has long resisted outside influence. The image of a pristine country, blessed by oil and urban centers but grounded in the desert and tradition, is articulated. The day-by-day itinerary, with a description of each day’s activities, follows the letter of introduction.

A major contribution of tourism will be to diminish this sense of mystery and to expose travelers to the reality of urban, cosmopolitan Saudi Arabia with its rich history, geography, culture, religion and peoples. Tourism will be most productive and fruitful for all parties when there is less emphasis on the exoticism of the country. If allowed by officials, more interactions between Saudis and tourists will be beneficial; indeed, the fewer distinctions made between tourists and Saudis, the richer the cultural experience will be.

PRODUCERS AND CONSUMERS OF PLACE

It is important to note that participation in tourism in Saudi Arabia is quite selective and the producers of knowledge include a wide range of professionals. A foreign tour operator (thus far, American, German, Italian, or Japanese) who manages all logistics and organization leads each tour group. That foreign operator works in conjunction with local tour guides, who are critical to the success of the venture. The Saudi Arabian guides bear responsibility for negotiating, representing, and interpreting their country. They, in turn, work closely with key princes who oversee tourism. Tours also benefit from the participation of representatives of the sponsoring group and study leaders, there to provide expertise.

Who are the early tourists? The participants in the tour were fairly homogenous in demographic traits, and this makes intuitive sense. Such tourism requires two things: time and money. By and large, the 30 consumers were white, elderly, well-to-do and retired (or able to turn their business affairs over to someone else for two weeks). As a group, they were well-educated and extraordinarily well traveled. The participants had walked on the Great Wall of China, wandered around Moscow square, hunted on African safaris, and relaxed on Caribbean beaches. Touring Saudi Arabia was one of many travel adventures in their lives. The price of access was \$7700 for thirteen days in the country inclusive of all travel, food, accommodations, buses and tips. No monetary transactions were necessary once in the country (except for personal shopping). A newspaper has already reported that people are complaining about the high price of trips, writing that “a large number of tourists believe that tour operators are charging exorbitant prices to arrange trips to the kingdom. Tour operators will have to bring down prices to attract more tourists.”²²

The schedule was highly structured and demanding. One could not deviate from the pre-planned schedule or strike off on one’s own to explore different sites. The only exception to this was within the Aramco compound in Dhahran, where ex-Aracoms, as they refer to themselves, were allowed to search out their old homes from years past. Even there, I was informed that they had a run-in with security guards patrolling the compound. Participants were always free to stay behind in the hotel if they chose (but that too was difficult, as there are not swimming pools or gyms available to women travelers yet).

Tour guides always serve an important role in the success of the touring experience. They are ‘...vilified and praised, lampooned and treated with respect and generally emerge as critical figures in the minds of tourists.’²³ Tour guides are simultaneously pathfinders, mentors, broker, educators, and interpreters.²⁴ In countries like Saudi Arabia, where basic information is at a premium, the role can feel overwhelming in its power. Tour guides serve as mediators between foreign consumer and local environment. All information is processed. The Saudi Arabian tour operators were crucial in their ability to relay explanations of behavior in a way that was often humorous and non-threatening to the tourists. Both local guides were superb in their skills; their personalities were engaging. Interestingly, one guide spoke beautiful English, but did so with an accent. He

²² Arab News, 30 July 00.

²³ Philip L. Pearce, *The Social Psychology of Tourist Behavior*, (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1982), p137.

²⁴ Ghana Gurung, David Simmons, and Patrick Devlin, “The Evolving Role of Tourist Guides: The Nepali Experience,” in *Tourism and Indigenous Peoples*, Thomas Hinch and Richard Butler, eds., (London: International Thomson Business Press, 1996) pp107-128.

was perceived by tourists to be not as skilled as the other guide, whom the tourists more openly embraced.

In my role as study leader, and as an educator by profession, I sought to explain the nuance and complexity of dress, social norms and behavior. Most of the tourists had little patience for meaningful discussion and preferred instead clear, and vastly over-simplified, answers. The risk is that cultural markers and symbols are de-contextualized. Their meaning and place become secondary to the visual image absorbed through the tourist gaze.²⁵ For now, at this early moment in tourism, it appears that the primary mediators of knowledge about Saudi Arabia are individuals who bridge the countries in some way; for example, scholars like myself who specialize in the area, a Saudi male married to an American woman, an American woman married to a Saudi man, and an American woman who works for a Prince. Such mediators are occasionally joined by U.S. Embassy officials. Aramco, through its facilities and, even more so, through the generous distribution of its publications, serves as a mediator. The local Saudi Arabian tour operators are only now learning about the sites in their country, or how to represent their country to others. They are young, eager, smart and ambitious, but unfortunately still take a backseat to other more “foreign” mediators.

REPRESENTATION AND THE ITINERARY

The Saudi Arabian state has been actively involved in the construction of a national memory and identity. Narrative construction and consolidation has been recently evident in the annual *Janadriyyah*, in the extensive Centennial Celebrations of the capture of Mismak Fort, and in the celebration of Riyadh as an Arab Cultural Capital. Such festivals, performances and rituals sustain and nourish the civic myth that the state propagates through the media, curriculum, and museums. Together they constitute a nation-building project. Tourism is a part of the nationalist project. If, as Anderson informs us, a nation is an imagined community, the Saudi Arabian state now seeks to construct “a shared fact of consciousness”²⁶ through this project. The task of producing history and consciousness is made easier through oil revenues and control of the discourse. As Jalal demonstrates in Pakistan, there has been an uneven division of labor between state and civil society that has characterized the construction and

²⁵ The phrase was coined by John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Societies* (London: Sage, 1990).

²⁶ See Uri Davis in Butenschon, Davis and Hasassian, *Citizenship and the State in the Middle East*, (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2000) p 59.

dissemination of information.²⁷ Oil wealth has lubricated the state's labor in Saudi Arabia.

A national identity is one that transcends family, particular religious affiliation and region, and gives content to the idea of self. Identity, and particularly a national identity, is not inherent or primordial. Indeed, it can be strategic and positional.²⁸ Thus, what becomes important are the facets of identity that one chooses to emphasize, or de-emphasize in the construction of an image of a nation. Most interesting is understanding the variability in what is included and what is excluded from this representation.²⁹

The representation being sold to these pioneering tourists actually covers a wide swath of Saudi Arabia (see Appendix for sites). It will be important over time to observe which sites are added and deleted, as the touring process is refined. Saudi Arabia must find the places and experiences that will, in MacCannell's words, stimulate a "simultaneous caring and concern for another person and for an object that is honored and shared but never fully possessed."³⁰ The tour focused on six primary regions, each typified through the compacted lens of tourism. Riyadh, a huge, bustling city, is the foreign affairs center, the national archive, and the center of history and the origins of the state. The portrait of Dhahran in the Eastern Province was high technology, petrochemical industry, Aramco, expatriate faces, oil, and consumerism. The days up north in al Jouf, by the border with Jordan, left an impression of the importance of extended family, new central pivot agricultural lands, and the transitions that settled Bedouins make. The experience in the marvelous Red Sea city of Jeddah is difficult to typify, but likely was perceived as cosmopolitan and commercial. The image of the Asir was of traditional dance, unique architecture and ruins. The tour group was actually exposed to a fairly broad spectrum of Saudi Arabia. More recently, trips to Saudi Arabia have been combined with trips to the United Arab Emirates and Oman. Such multi-national tourism may promote a greater sense of "GCC-ness" or of being "of the peninsula."

²⁷ Ayesha Jalal, "Conjuring Pakistan: History as Official Imagining," *IJMES*, 27 (1995): p 77.

²⁸ Stuart Hall, "Introduction: Who Needs Identity?" in S. Hall and P. duGay, eds., *Questions of Cultural Identity*, 1996.

²⁹ See Simone Abram, Jaqueline Waldren and Donald McCleod, *Tourists and Tourism: Identifying with People and Places* (Oxford: Berg) 1997, for discussion of identity and tourism.

³⁰ Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999) p 203.

NARRATIVE PRIVILEGES

The National Museum in Riyadh, which is spectacular by any stretch of the imagination, opened in 1999. A particular telling of history has long been told in the school curriculum,³¹ but only now has history been assembled methodically and displayed in a way that conveys a message through visual, tactile, and aural mediums. A viewer could easily spend days there. The history of Arabia has been distilled into a national narrative.³²

The exhibit carefully combines religious development, economic activities, technological advancement, climate, and peoples to weave a fabric in which the threads of continuity and traditions of the past are stitched together to produce a spiritual, industrial, and educated place of the future. That is, it offers a construction of identity derived from an exemplary past, which will bring the state into the age of (what I think is) modernity with meaning. Reinterpreting the past requires a strong sense of what stories resonate emotionally with populations; to do so where there is a lack of congruence between communal identities and the state requires finesse and subtlety; this is the statecraft to which Davis refers.³³

The Museum constructs and institutionalizes a particular telling of history, as has been common in national museums.³⁴ It is a state-produced historical narrative. The National Museum and other regional museums convey a story about the founding of the Kingdom and its development over the decades which emphasizes the power of Islam, the wisdom of Abdulaziz and the unity of peoples under the al Saud family. The official narrative presents the historical past, from which it can selectively appropriate, and an optimistic vision of the future. The narrative privileges, and meticulously weaves together, the power of Islam and the al Saud family, who protect the moral integrity of the country. It is

³¹ See a wonderful article by Madawi al Rasheed, "Political Legitimacy and the Production of History: The Case of Saudi Arabia," in *New Frontiers in Middle East Security*, L. Martin, ed., (New York: St. Martins Press, 1999) pp25-46.

³² As well, a 12 volume Arabic language "Encyclopedia of Folklore of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia" was just published last year. See Judith Miller, "Encyclopedia Raises Veil on Ancient Saudi culture," *New York Times*, 20 June 2000.

³³ Eric Davis "Theorizing Statecraft and Social Change in Arab Oil-Producing Countries, in *Statecraft in the Middle East: Oil, Historical Memory and Popular Culture*, Eric Davis and Nicolas Gavrieldes, eds., (Miami: Florida International University Press, 1991) p 13.

³⁴ On museums, see Michael Hitchcock, Nick Stanley, and Siu, King Chung, "The South-east Asian "living museum" and its Antecedents," in Abram, et al, eds.

a national narrative that is “simultaneously ideological and utopic.”³⁵ Important historical reference points include not only the hijra, but also the 1744 alliance between Muhammad al Wahhab and Muhammad al Saud and the “unification of the tribes” during the early part of the 20th century. Other tribes and regions were not conquered, but unified. Repeatedly, cities like Taif, Jeddah and Mecca “opened the gates” to Abdulaziz. One leaves the National Museum to tour the King Abdul Aziz Memorial Hall. Other than the Prophet Mohammad, he is clearly the central and defining figure in Saudi Arabian history. In fact, the National Museum concludes with Abdulaziz and the glorious history of state formation under his wise leadership. Curiously, it does not tell the story of Saudi Arabia under the rule of his sons.

The architecture and ambience of the museum are remarkable. In privileging Islam, the pre-Islamic age is constructed as the Period of Conflict marked by security threats, political confusion and chaos. The exhibit is visually and aurally disturbing. Strobe lights amid the darkness disorient the viewer; horrible sounds of warring tribes – people screaming, children crying, hooves galloping — make one want to flea the room. The architecture is angular and sharp. As you turn the corner, an escalator awaits to bring you upward to the safety, serenity and brightness of Islam (the rooms are bright; the sounds are quietly joyous, the rooms are long and spacious). Islam moved people into the age of enlightenment, just as contemporary observers move *literally* from the age of ignorance and darkness via escalator into the brightness and illumination of the age of Islam. To foreign tourists, this museum accomplished a great task. I had been asked repeatedly about the impending clash between religion and science, and how a “backward” (in the pre-conception of tourists) faith like Islam could possibly survive in the age of computers. The Museum answered these questions indirectly; the entire complex constitutes a high-technology exhibit of Islam and Saudi Arabia.³⁶

The visit to the National Museum was book-ended with excursions to crumbling ruins of al Dir’aiyah, the ancestral home of the al Saud, and to Mismak Fortress, where the al Saud celebrate their capture of Riaydh from the al

³⁵ Layoun notes this combination in her discussion of nationalism-as- narrative in Lebanon. In Mary Layoun “A Guest at the Wedding,” in Caren Kaplan, Norma Alarcon and Mino Moallem *Between Woman and Nation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999) p 94.

³⁶ The new Secretary General of Tourism and former space shuttle astronaut, Sultan ibn Salman, stresses that cultural heritage is preserved in the museum while not impeding the path of progress. He said that Saudi Arabia “believes in change for the sake of progress, and not for the sake of change.” “Tourism Secretary General Praises Riyadh in London Speech,” Saudi Arabian Embassy press release, 10 May 2000.

Rasheed in 1902. The period from 1744 to the declaration of the modern state is presented in seamless fashion.

NARRATIVE AMBIGUITIES AND CONFUSIONS

Importantly, the museum does acknowledge a pre-Islamic history. Only a decade ago, this was not openly discussed; when it was cursorily mentioned, pre-Islamic history was thrown together into a morass simply labeled the jahiliya. No details were available and discussion was not encouraged. All development prior to the seventh century was portrayed as a turbulent, bad black hole. History did not begin until the time of the Prophet Muhammad. Now however, a large section of the national museum is devoted to this expanse of time and human history. Interestingly, the accelerated pace of significant archeological discoveries in Saudi Arabia may have prompted this change. The state cannot discover, preserve and trumpet its land as the site of many old societies without placing them in a continuum of time. The state is not yet sure how to represent this period. On the one hand, archeological ruins lend real significance to the role of Arabia in human development. On the other, it confuses the long-standing dominant narrative. So, for now, the museum carefully describes the civilizations and their time, but then suggest through sound, light and text that the period shortly before Islam (400-600 AD) was turbulent.

A second interesting narrative ambiguity concerns an out-of-the-way museum that is devoted to the accomplishments of King Saud. He, of course, has largely been written out of official history. His reign is generally covered in a short paragraph. The bankruptcy of the country is not mentioned. His deposition is not discussed. In commercial and government offices, the standard row of framed portraits of kings often proceeds from Abdulaziz directly to Faisal, Khalid and Fahd, with a glaring absence. Yet, an entire, albeit small, museum is dedicated to his rule and his achievements. It is fascinating. He is portrayed as the protégé of his father and in fact once saved the life of his father during hajj when people tried to knife him during tawwaf. There are rare pictures and documents. Unfortunately, though I longed for a return visit, that museum was deleted from the subsequent tour group itinerary.

NARRATIVE SILENCES AND EXCLUSIONS

This official representation of self and history is not always congruent with what one hears in private conversations. The Museum does not reconstruct the many alternative tellings of history that exist throughout the country. It does not recount episodes that were painful for many people during the formative years of the country, such as the massacres in the south or the walls of bodies at Taif (called “opening the gates” in the official narrative). Alternative narratives are

about conquering rather than unification; violence rather than wisdom, and the abuse of Islam rather than its embrace.³⁷ Marriage into defeated tribes, long a standard part of the dominant narrative to illustrate the kindness of Abdulaziz, “was a trinket, like graft. It was un-Islamic.” The official narrative does not include diverse regional accounts about social contracts or pacts reached between Abdulaziz and local notables. It is silent on the pact to separate the public and political from the private and commercial.³⁸ It does not speak about the negative impacts of the oil boom of the 1970’s that reverberated throughout the country, or about obsequious consumption.

Both the Shi’a community and various Sunni Islamist groups have carefully constructed alternative tellings of history. They are every bit as carefully woven as the one in the National Museum. Their histories are coherent narratives, intricate and internally consistent, and woven from a fabric of cultural symbols and language that resonate among people. Khalid al Fawwaz, now being extradited to the U.S. for alleged involvement in the bombings in Kenya and Tanzania, began a long historical telling by explaining, “We must appreciate history, but our history is different from the one being told.” Saad Faqih records an alternative history in his publication, “The History of Dissent in Arabia.” The Shi’a Reform Movement has recorded its history in opposition publications.³⁹ Activists commented how very important oral history has been to the Shi’a community. He remembers clearly when, as a young boy, he was called to his uncle's side who said, “ibn akhi (son of my brother), do not believe anything that is written down. History is written by those in power. Do not believe the texts, especially those on religion.” Al Massari states that “The Wahhabi in contemporary Saudi Arabia do not name the exact ancestors to which we should refer because it would undo their own arguments about authority and obedience. If we really read the early stuff, we would see that the ancestors do not advocate blind obedience to unjust rule, but rebellion...Their writing undermines the position of the al Saud, so they have been conveniently dropped from the discourse.” For some, then, the dominant narrative is a distortion of social and political history.

The representation of Saudi Arabia portrayed by the itinerary excluded two other important parts of the population. First, tourists did not see the

³⁷ Alternative Islamist tellings are derived from in-depth interviews with al Faqih (MIRA), al Massari (CDLR) and al Fawwaz (CAR) in 1997 and 1999, and from several interviews with Shi’a activists between 1992-1998.

³⁸ Alternative regional tellings are derived from extensive interviews across in Saudi Arabia in 1989-90.

³⁹ See Madawi al Rasheed, *Political Legitimacy and the Production of History*.

underbelly of Saudi Arabia.⁴⁰ This would be expected in any tour of any country; it is just that in Saudi Arabia the underbelly is really quite large, even if hidden from view. There was no discussion of the 7.2 million foreign laborers who comprise about 95% of the private sector labor force (and 70% of the public sector labor force). Saudi Arabia encounters a difficult dilemma currently – it has about a 40% unemployment rate among college graduates, yet remains extraordinarily dependent on the importation of labor. The tourists were not exposed to the self-contained housing compounds, designed to group workers together by nationality and to prevent mobility. They did not see the sub-standard living conditions of millions. Saudi Arabian guides did explain that now, because of the change in oil markets, Saudi Arabia does have different economic classes for the first time. In fact, Saudi Arabia has always been home to different economic classes; it is just that structurally the underclass has always been composed primarily of foreigners.

Second, except for pre-planned excursions, the tour group did not encounter any Saudi Arabian women, fully half of the population. They did visit a school for girls, and had dinner in two Saudi Arabian homes at which women were present. The absence of women on the streets, in the markets or in the hotels troubled several tourists. To some, the physical absence of women in the public realm was equated with total and complete oppression and servility. Rather than examine the ways in which women creatively negotiate their lives and empower themselves to survive and perhaps prosper in constrained circumstances, some participants sought reinforcement of pre-existing images. Finally, were it not for my lectures, tourists would not have been exposed to the myriad ways in which oil affects society, politics, and economics. The official sites trumpeted the technological glories of oil production; I discussed the ways in which oil affected urbanization, social change, and norms. Clearly, there are multiple historic traditions in Saudi Arabia, each struggling to assert its truth and relevance.

THE MUDDY EDGES OF CONTROLLED TOURISM: GLOBALISM AND IDENTITY

International group tourism is highly structured, with every minute of every day accounted for by planners. There is lacking spontaneity, flexibility, and indigenous interaction. Currently, it seems that distinctions between self and other (Saudi and tourist) are emphasized rather than commonalities. The more human interaction that can be introduced on these trips, the better. The most

⁴⁰ Though there now appears to be a new mode of voyeur tourism, in which the itineraries of foreign tourists are purposely designed to bring busloads into the ghettos and shantytowns of the developing world.

revealing moments of tourism occur, then, when the pre-planned itinerary did not proceed as scheduled, or when participants refused to abide by rules of the game. These “muddy edges” provide rich soil for analysis of the interplay between globalism and identity, or between the needs of tourists and the protection of domestic jurisdiction.

There are three edges, at which there is some tension, but where national identity clearly has the edge, i.e., globalism will accommodate identity (tourists will abide by rules and norms). These concern prayer times, religious separation in the holy cities, and the death penalty waiver. First, within the constructs of a tour, regular prayer time plays havoc with tour itineraries. As study leader, I sought to explain the power of community prayer, the simplicity of prayer, and to suggest that the call to prayer was part of the fabric of daily business. The tour operator, however, as I was cognizant of, had to time to the minute every route and every stop in order to work around prayer times. Two minutes late and the group would miss entering a museum on time; they would have to cool their heels inside a parked bus in a lot. Or, in another instance, a suq was closed, and having to wait for the shopping excursion then had repercussions for the remainder of the day since it was then too dark to see the world’s largest oasis. My point is that tourism and its operators will have to learn to build exciting and feasible tour schedules around prayer; prayer will not, and of course should not, accommodate tourism.

Second, non-Moslems are not allowed into the holy cities of Mecca and Medinah. The tour group utilized a nice hotel on the outskirts of Medinah as a departure point for a long bus ride north to the magnificent ruins of Madain Saleh. The architecture of the hotel to which we were confined was interesting, designed so that most windows face inward toward a courtyard. The hotel, while comfortable, was silent and solitary. International tourists were not allowed to stroll outside. Again, tourism will accommodate identity. Perhaps as more international tour groups go to Saudi Arabia, the atmosphere of the hotel will become more lively and interactive... a way station for non-Moslem tourists.

Third, the state requires that all tourists sign a death penalty waiver before a visa is issued. Being asked to sign a document that you will abide by all laws of a state while you are there is common and acceptable. This particular document, however, stipulates as well that tourists “shall respect the morals, customs, values and feelings of Saudi society... I am aware that alcohol, drug narcotics, pornographic materials, and all types of religious, political or cultural leaflets, pamphlets, magazines, books, audio tapes, video tapes, films, or other references of all sorts, contradictory to Islam are prohibited from entering the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, whether for personal use or otherwise.” As currently constructed, this document serves to re-enforce pre-existing images of a

“mysterious” country rather than enlighten the traveler about law or religion. The ambiguity and broadness of its language serve to confuse rather than elucidate. While it is clear that pork, alcohol, drugs and pornography are forbidden in the country, it is less obvious how to define the “morals, customs, values and feelings of Saudi society” or what words are “contradictory to Islam.” Even if the language is made more explicit, tourists will likely be expected to sign a statement before entry.

MUDDY EDGES

There are four muddy edges that are the site of maneuvering and contestation between international tourists and national identities. These concern photography, security, social norms/dress, and foreign labor. The way in which these issues play out and the skill with which they are handled will affect the future of tourism in Saudi Arabia. The individuals who champion a very gradual opening are cognizant of the possibility of a “backlash” from socially conservative forces, which could be precipitated by such incidents. These muddy edges represent a struggle over the image of the country.

Photography Muddy Edge

The participants in the tour were exceedingly well traveled. All were experienced at hosting travel slide shows for their friends and all had beautiful photo albums of their international adventures. It became very difficult (and taxing) to explain repeatedly and often to no avail, why an expenditure of \$7700 for this experience did not entitle them to snap pictures freely. The trip was perceived as a transaction in which the price of admittance entitled them to the privilege of contravening local norms. The truth is that opening the country to tourism is one thing; reproducing images freely is quite another. An effort was made to explain the source of constraints on photography in Saudi Arabia that stem from considerations of religion (only God can produce a human), social norms (to protect the privacy of women and family) and security (broadly construed). Some tourists could not comprehend this, or simply thought it was silly and chose to disregard the constraints. No matter how many cautions, prohibitions and explanations were articulated, many tourists continued to snap photos, often with enormous telephoto lenses. It was a constant bone of contention, and became a serious issue at a museum stop in al Ula, a small town on the way to Madain Saleh. One woman, having just been told that photographs were prohibited in this town, walked to the far side of the bus and began to snap away. The mutawwa (loosely and poorly translated as, morals security) approached her. She simply turned and walked away, making the situation even worse. It appeared that she not only violated the agreements, but then she added insult to injury by rebuking local authorities. The Saudi Arabian tour operators

were placed in a very uncomfortable position of having to negotiate out of this situation. The process was long and difficult and required the intervention of the local museum director.

In Dhahran, the men and women tourists split into groups so that each could observe a private primary school in operation, the men attending the boys side, the women going to the girls section. I heard a male participant ask a female participant to slip a camera under her abaya to take a picture of unveiled females. This apparently happened on another tour as well, as recorded in the *Travel and Leisure* article.⁴¹ He, too, was unsuccessful.

In the private home of a local family, after dinner was consumed, cameras came flying out of the bags. The women of the family fled the room. Finally, an older woman consented to photos and kept her face covered as she posed by a fire in the tent. But after countless poses and photos, her scarf would fall from her face and participants would try to sneak a peek of a Saudi Arabian woman. It is not clear how long this kind of cat-and-mouse game can continue. Will the family put its collective foot down and forbid photos of women while still graciously hosting tour groups? Or, alternatively, was this acceptable and perhaps indicative of the beginning of photos of women outside of the family unit?

In Dhahran, we stopped with some fanfare to see the first well in Saudi Arabia from which oil flowed in the 1930's. In the tourist imagination, well #7 serves as a symbol of the fabulous boom of Saudi Arabia – it captures for some a mythology about the transformation of a country from tribal desert beginnings to bustling urban centers, from a nomadic people to a state at the heart of the global economy. We arrived and everybody disembarked to snap this fabled place, only to be told in no uncertain terms that photos of the well were not permitted. I am able to explain constraints on taking pictures of women, the human form and military installations, but this was difficult to explain. A capped hole in the ground behind a fence does not appear to constitute a security installation, but security is broadly defined in Saudi Arabia.

The real challenge is less over the private memories of individual tourists and more over reproduction on the internet. What if a tourist posts on his web site travel photo gallery pictures that were secretly snapped of unveiled Saudi Arabian women? How long Saudi Arabia can invite in foreign tourists and yet restrict their memory banks is not clear. With tourism at the intersection of globalism and national identity, how long can restrictions be placed on paying tourists? The issue is being discussed in Saudi Arabia, as evidenced in an editorial in which the author searches for an explanation of the many restrictions

⁴¹ P 228

on photography.⁴² He argues that forbidding photography serves no real purpose, and in some cases actually creates ill-will, bad publicity, and misunderstanding. He made repeated references to incidents involving foreign tourists.

Security Muddy Edge

The second, and closely related, muddy edge is that of security and permissions. The tour bus arrived at the Hajj Terminal at the Jeddah airport. The structure has won many awards and is striking in its open, stark beauty – rows of white “tent peaks” arrayed against a brilliant blue sky. Tourists walked freely about the open-air terminal, taking pictures even after the local guide asked them to refrain. The discussion went back and forth; tourists simply disregarded his words. Finally, exasperated and uncomfortable, he pleaded with me, “This is serious. We do not have permission. Make them stop.” Protracted negotiations took place between the local tour operators and the terminal security guards. There was a good deal of running between offices and there were many permissions to seek. Curiously, the tourists and the U.S. operator were blissfully unconcerned with the delicate position in which we had placed the local guides. The U.S. operator assured me, “We are OK. We have permission.” I do not think he understood yet that in Saudi Arabia, not all permissions are equal. And sometimes, you need many permissions. This incident reinforced my observation that it is neither the tourists nor the foreign operators who pay the price for such incidents. It is the local tour guides who are put in precarious positions that require social skills and negotiating abilities.

Social Norms Muddy Edge

The third muddy edge concerns social norms and proper covering of women. The female tourists chafed constantly about having to wear an abaya and head scarf. Rather than simply assume that it must be worn (as they had agreed prior to the trip), many constantly asked, “Do we have to wear this thing?” I endeavored to explain how different styles and degrees of covering reflect differences in ideology, class, and region. Most never did appreciate the significant variation that exists within the general norm of covering; it was just all black and it was all hot. One foreign tour operator company put what it believes is a positive spin on the dress requirement in their press coverage of tourism. It suggests that, rather than taking away from the experience of traveling to an exotic place, such rules on covering reinforce the exoticism (which sells tours for them). “There aren’t that many places in the world where

⁴² Khalid al Maena, “Clicking Off the Curbs of Out-dated Practices,” *Gulf News*, 24 May 2000.

you have to mesh yourself into the country to see it. It adds an interesting perspective.”⁴³

Most women grudgingly wore the abaya; however, one woman was particularly troublesome. At the old suq in al Hofuf, where group tourism really is a new thing, she paraded through the narrow rows of stalls with her abaya unbuttoned, so that it flowed open toward the back as she walked. She wore a bright white, tight t-shirt and strolled with her hands in her pockets. Not only did she call attention to herself in this way, she then asked a local guide to assist her in buying a face veil. As if to provide a double insult, she purchased a bedouin burqa (a particular style). Now, her face was fully covered in black, her hair was uncovered, and her abaya flapped open as she walked through the rows of merchandise.

Another encounter with different social norms became evident after a dinner in a Saudi Arabian home. Interestingly, as we boarded the bus to return to the hotel, I noted that one of the tourists was wearing something new. She had apparently walked out of the home with the personal coat belonging to a family member. One can only assume that she complemented the coat and in turn, the host insisted that she keep it. Saudi Arabians take the social norms of hospitality to new heights. When guests complement an item, hosts may feel obligated to give the item to the admirer. This was not a wealthy family we had visited. The tourist wore this coat proudly for the duration of the trip, in place of her abaya. But I wonder how long families can play hosts to tourists if they lose their private possessions. There is a steep learning curve involved for all participants.⁴⁴

Foreign Labor Muddy Edge

The fourth muddy edge is one that is hidden from the tourist gaze; i.e., living conditions of the foreign labor force. At a road security stop in the Hejaz, it became clear in watching the animated discussion between security and the local guides that our bus driver lacked a proper igama (legal work permit). Had our local operator not been so skilled at negotiation, we would have had to turn around and scrap the days' itinerary. On another day, a Filipino bus driver, accidentally caught the bus on a large boulder that had tumbled onto the edge of the street during construction. He could not maneuver the bus; we were stuck. As he followed the instructions of the Saudis to disengage from the rock, the

⁴³ Powell, "Saudi Tourism."

⁴⁴ Indeed, there were fewer problematic situations on the second trip than on the first. Everyone involved had already learned how to pre-empt potential tensions. The trip proceeded more smoothly.

side mirror then caught on a tree branch. It was hot and humid. The all-important closely timed itinerary was in jeopardy. Tempers flared in a quietly contained manner. The bus would not budge; we sat inside the bus as the men tried to remedy the situation. Several tourists inquired of me, I think with genuine sincerity, “What will happen to the driver now? What will they do to him?” There was some unease that he would be deported, refused salary or worse. When I relayed these concerns to the Saudi Arabian guide, he explained into the microphone that the firm had to fill out insurance forms in triplicate to submit their claims in order to get the repairs done. The tourists sighed with relief.

The muddy edge of foreign labor was again exposed at the end of a long, lovely day touring a farm. We climbed a sand dune, enjoyed tea and dates at the family compound, and watched as hundreds of sheep ran in the pasture. It was a wonderful afternoon. As we prepared to board the bus at the end of the day, it became apparent that the small, windowless cinder block building was the residence of foreign laborers who staffed the farm, probably for all of them. The heat inside must have been searing. Its residential nature was revealed only because of the puppies that played outside and a dried-up okra garden out back. I could have spoken for hours about the conditions of foreign laborers and the restrictions on their mobility. Without entering, I could have accurately described its contents – thin cots for beds, a small buta-gas camp stove for food preparation, and no running water. But on private property and having just enjoyed the warmth of this family, it would have been inappropriate. In all fairness, these Filipino workers spoke very highly of their employer. This muddy edge was just barely and accidentally exposed. It cannot be hidden forever.

TOURISM AND SOCIOPOLITICAL DISCOURSE: LOSING THE MONOPOLY

Nevertheless, this is old-fashioned, private, for-profit tourism. This is an important distinction to understand because it fundamentally affects control of the discourse. Saudi Arabia has long hosted visiting delegations of specialized groups, e.g., non-specialist scholars.⁴⁵ These delegations have traveled under the auspices of cultural and educational exchange; the trips are significantly subsidized, so those travelers are essentially guests of the country. In exchange for the trip, participants are normally expected to contribute different kinds of community outreach upon their return, e.g., talks or newspaper articles on the

⁴⁵ Gwenn Okruhlik, “Bringing the Peninsula in From the Periphery: From Imagined Scholarship to Gendered Discourse,” *Middle East Report*, July-September 1997, No. 204, Vol. 27, No. 3, 36-37.

country. Private tourism is quite different; anyone with time and money can sign up for the excursion. Since they paid a hefty price for the tour, no expectations are incumbent upon participants. They may write or evaluate the experience in whatever ways they choose. There is no pretense of scholarly or cultural exchange; these are simply tourists seeing the world. This fundamentally changes the dynamics of travel because the kingdom can no longer control the discourse about its development.

Already, within this first year of tourism, the impact is clear. Two full pages of a newspaper were devoted to Saudi Arabia after a writer joined a tour and wrote an account of his experience.⁴⁶ Interestingly, these articles are not in the travel section, but comprise the cover story of the “Perspective” (editorial) section, and are headed “Foreign Affairs.” The essay opens with this rather strong sentence, “Stand the U.S. Constitution on its head, and you have Saudi Arabia,” and he continues, “Absent the oil equation, it’s a fair surmise that U.S. policy toward this desert kingdom would manifest — at least to some degree — the abhorrence aimed at such repressive regimes as communist North Korea and the Taliban fundamentalists of Afghanistan. Saudi Arabia...has ample trappings of a police state.” The writer goes on to detail the absence of press freedom, constraints on women, the absence of any free expression, the absence of basic political rights, as well as the lack of movies and concerts.

The first major coverage of tourism in Saudi Arabia appeared in *Travel & Leisure*, a glossy monthly magazine that caters to the industry and to well-heeled tourists. The magazine sent a writer and photographer to accompany one of the first U.S. tour groups. The table of contents reads, “”Shifting Sands: One of the most secretive of the OPEC members, Saudi Arabia has finally decided to open its doors to Westerners. Hitch a ride with the first American tour group to visit a kingdom that still isn’t sure that tourists are a good idea.”⁴⁷ In reference to a brief stay on the outskirts of Medinah, the writer asks, “Since the fall of the Soviet Union, how many places are left on earth where you can be restricted to your hotel?”

Newsweek, too, carried a very brief blurb on “Touring Muslim Style,” in which the author suggested rules of the road for visits to Islamic countries. The only mention of Saudi Arabia was that all female tourists would be issued a black abaya, the voluminous cloak Saudi Arabian women wear.⁴⁸ It is apparent

⁴⁶ Jack Schnedler, “Saudi Arabia: Our Strange Bedfellow,” (Little Rock: *Arkansas Democrat Gazette*, 16 April 2000) Section J, Pages 1 and 8.

⁴⁷ Ted Conover (writer) and Brown W Cannon III (photographer), Shifting Sands, *Travel & Leisure*, March 2000, p154.

⁴⁸ Carla Power, Touring Muslim Style, *Newsweek*, 10 July 2000, p70.

that the state will lose its monopoly on the discourse; permitting tourism and the construction of tourist memories, then, is actually a rather bold and risky move on the part of its sponsors. At some level, it takes guts (and perhaps confidence) to allow this development.

IDENTITY AND TOURISM: ON BEING AND BELONGING IN SAUDI ARABIA

The complexity of the political economy of tourism in Saudi Arabia is demonstrated in its muddy edges; in the loss of the state monopoly of discourse; in the inclusions and exclusions in representation, and in the motivations of tourists to travel there. The tourist experience also demonstrated how quickly things are changing in Saudi Arabia. Sites that were pristine ten years ago are now ringed in tourist villas and amusement parks. Ruins that were poignant in their worn majesty have been restored to gleaming newness and are accessible by cable car. Suqs that were off the beaten track are now on international itineraries.

It also evident, however, new spaces for public discourse are cautiously opening in Saudi Arabia. There simply is more discussion about more subjects in public than previously. Society is opening faster than state policy. For the first time in recent memory, there is acknowledgment of difference among Saudi Arabians. That is, different regions, costumes, and customs are acknowledged and even celebrated in museums and shows. Together with a dominant narrative of Islam and Abdul Aziz, there exists acknowledgment of diversity. In addition, there is for the first time a new comfort level in acknowledging the pre-Islamic past. Rather than denying it, it is analyzed in museums.

There is a tremendous upside to the fact that Saudi Arabia is such a latecomer to international tourism and to archeology. Rich ruins that lay beneath the desert are so late in being discovered – archeology is just unfolding – that the sites are protected. Shards and monuments will remain in Saudi Arabia and be documented by a new generation of Saudi Arabian archeologists. They will not be looted and taken to capital cities on other continents. The sense of self and domestic jurisdiction (*vis a vis* foreigners) is strongly enough embedded to protect national resources. Furthermore, tourism was only initiated in the year 2000, long after the jargon of “sustainable development” became a part of our lexicon.⁴⁹ Late-late incorporation into the global tourism economy may prove to be a benefit and allow Saudi Arabia to avoid pitfalls that marred tourist development in the years prior to cognizance of sustainability.

⁴⁹ Peter E. Murphy, “Tourism and Sustainable Development,” in Theobald, pp 274-290.

In a tangential but parallel vein, the massive encyclopedia of Saudi Arabian folklore that was recently published is described as “a truly nationalist project.” The contributors said that such an endeavor could not be undertaken until the last decade because tribal and regional divisions continued to plague the country. “Until Saudis spoke the same Arabic dialect and tribal and regional cultural differences diminished, a project examining the country’s heritage would have been too contentious to be approved by the censors.”⁵⁰ Again, the country was late in preserving its heritage, but the long delay also made preservation feasible.

“Being a Saudi” has been defined in recent years vis a vis the other, the other being the millions foreigners laborers who staff the economy. Identity and citizenship were about belonging to a community that was distinguished from foreign laborers by particular social norms and by economic privilege. The rights and obligations of citizenship have been defined in social and economic ways to encompass Islamic values, conformist social behavior, and the centrality of the family unit. Tourism is very much about this evolving national narrative on being and belonging. The muddy edges of cultural representation reflect contested voices within Saudi Arabia (that is, gender, ethnicity, social norms, authoritarianism, and a particular version of Islam). Analyzing tourism provides a rich research agenda on the interplay of global economic imperatives and national identity as it relates to gender, region, religion and ethnicity.

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⁵⁰ Sa’ad al Sowayan, in Judith Miller, “Encyclopedia Raises...”

APPENDIX: DESCRIPTION OF TOUR ITINERARY

In Riyadh, located in the central Province, participants visited the stunning new National Museum, the fortress –like Diplomatic Quarter, Qasr al Tuwaiq, al Dir’aiyah (the ancestral home of the al Saud family), Mismak Fort (where Abdulaziz and his band of forty men captured the Najd back from the Rashids), and a camel market. In Dhahran in the Eastern Province, participants visited the hi-tech exhibit at Aramco, Well #7 where oil was discovered in 1938, the infrastructural wonder of the causeway that links Saudi Arabia to the island state of Bahrain, and a private school (where male tourists observed the boys section and female tourists observed the girls section). An excursion to the old suq in al Hofuf was also on the itinerary, as was a stop at a date market. The stay in al Jouf was shaped by our experiences with the family of the Saudi Arabian tour guide. Also there, tourists saw many ruins including Domat al Jandal, Sakaka, Qasr Zabel, Qasr Marid, the mosque of Omar and Rajajil, a small Stonehenge-like monument of standing rocks. The group then used a hotel on the outskirts of Medinah proper (into which non-Muslims cannot go) as a point of departure for a trip up north to see the remnants of the Hejaz Railway and the tombs cut into rock in the dramatic landscape of Madain Saleh. In the beautiful port city of Jeddah, tourists visited the Abdul Raouf Khalil Museum (a private collection of artwork of varied quality and origin), the Greek Island Restaurant (to which Saudis would never go), the hajj terminal, the historic home of the Naseef family, and the old Jeddah suq. The highlight of the city was a dinner in the backyard of a private villa, complete with laser and sound show and a fashion show. Finally, the days in the Asir included stops at the National Park, Habala Village, Rigal al Ma, and the market of Khamis Mushayt.