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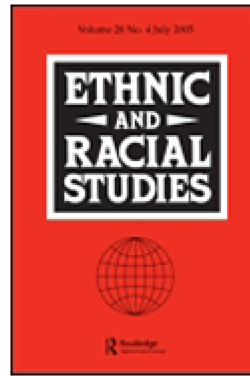


# Dressing the nation: National dress as a concealer of difference and marker of national boundaries

## A case study of young Emirati citizens in Dubai



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# Dressing the nation: National dress as a concealer of difference and marker of national boundaries

## A case study of young Emirati citizens in Dubai

**Idil Akinci, Department of Global Studies, University of Sussex, Falmer, Brighton UK**[1]

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**Abstract**

Through an ethnography of young Emirati citizens from Dubai, this article explores the symbolic role of their national dress in the construction and maintenance of Emirati national identity. Taking into consideration the ethnic and racial diversities among Emirati citizens, and the demographic imbalance in the Emirates, I argue that the national dress functions either to convince Emiratis that 'they are Emirati enough' or to remind migrants who Emirati nationals are. These everyday performances simultaneously create a 'common culture' that determines the tenacity of Emirati national identity, even in the absence of common ancestors or, at times, of citizenship. Focusing on Dubai, this article draws connections between the Gulf, an understudied region, and the 'Western' societies, where in both of the contexts, a presumed common culture is increasingly instrumentalised as a justification for the demarcation of national boundaries and consolidated by everyday performances.

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## Introduction

> "If I wear jeans, they will forget my nationality! This dress is my nationality…"

As illustrated by Majed's statement above, a young Emirati participant in this study, Gulf national dress is endorsed as a hallmark of citizenship in many of the Gulf countries, as it gives nationals the security of being undoubtedly recognized as (such.) (Onley 2005, 78). This is particularly important in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Qatar, where migrants outnumber citizens significantly. Today, Gulf national dress, *disdasha* for men and *abaya* for women, is officially and popularly represented as integral to this region's history and citizens' sense of identity. Scholars argue that Gulf national dress, which derived from the Najdi (i.e.

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Bedouin) culture, is one of the main 'invented traditions' of the newly established Gulf States and plays an important role in the construction and maintenance of an imagined community based on an Arab and Bedouin heritage (Kanna 2011; Khalaf 2005; Onley 2005; Al Mutawa 2016).

Taking into consideration the internal diversity among Emirati nationals and the demographic imbalance between national and migrant populations, this paper explores the role of national dress in the everyday construction and maintenance of national boundaries by individuals living in Dubai. I focus particularly on young Emirati nationals, who come from backgrounds that may not fit the official and popular portrayal of who an Emirati is: Bedouin, tribal, and Arab (Vora 2013,178). The Gulf authorities place emphasis on preserving the national identity of its young population. This article is mostly though not exclusively, concerned with young Emiratis, whose parents and/or grandparents migrated from various parts of the Indian Ocean, Southern Persia, Arabian Peninsula and Africa during 19th and 20th century and received Emirati citizenship before and/or after the federation (Jamal 2015, 610).This is in order to uncover that those whose membership to the nation is 'ambiguous', interact with the national narrative, negotiate their inclusion and seek to be recognised as a part of the national community (Tufail and Poynting 2013).

The findings are based on doctoral research conducted between 2015 and 2016 in Dubai, where I interviewed both young citizen and migrant populations. Informed by theories on everyday nationhood and performance (Fox and Miller-Idriss 2008; Edensor 2002; Goffman 1999), I argue that analysing the role of performing national identity through everyday acts and embodiment of national symbols, such as national dress, by individuals is crucial for understanding how boundaries of national identity are demarcated and symbolically mark the nation's insiders and outsiders. In this article I illustrate how national dress functions either to convince fellow Emiratis that 'they are Emirati enough' or to remind migrants who Emirati nationals are. In addition, I also argue that through repetitive performances, Emirati national dress become 'second nature' and an emotional symbol for young Emirati nationals' expression of identity, creating a 'common culture', even in the absence of common ancestors or at times, of citizenship.

The novel contribution of this article is twofold. First, it addresses the scarcity of ethnographic literature on Gulf citizens, especially in the United Arab Emirates, which predominantly focuses on state-led initiatives (see Dresch 2005), rentier theories (see Ross 2012) and migrant lives (see Vora and Koch 2015) in the study of Gulf national identities. Instead, I show how boundaries are created, maintained and blurred among citizens, which simultaneously define the content of Emirati national identity and determine why some are included while others are rendered outsiders. Second, by showing the similar processes of national identity construction in the UAE with other societies, I aim to break the tendency in academia to treat Gulf societies as a 'homogenous' societal structure, limiting the imagination of these societies as not 'intriguing enough' for research, as noted by various Gulf scholars (Alshawi and Gardner 2013; Vora 2013; Longva 2006). This article thus draws closer connections between the Gulf and the major theoretical debates in everyday nationhood, by showing how symbolic markers are similarly used to create 'authentic' nations and justify the legal and social exclusion of individuals from its boundaries (Parekh 2011; Meer, Dwyer, and Modood 2010).

I begin with a brief review of literature on the role of invented traditions, symbolic markers and everyday performances in the construction of national communities. In order to situate the UAE, and in particular Dubai, I provide a contextual background to my field site by touching



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upon the literature on the construction of Gulf identities and especially on the role of national dress. I then discuss my methodological approach and empirical findings over two final sections. The first section discusses how the official national dress of the UAE is used by citizens to explicitly express their nationality both to fellow citizens and migrants. The second illustrates the contingent nature of inclusion to and exclusion from the nation.

**Construction of a national narrative on identity: Dressing the nation**

In the pursuit of constructing a national identity that is capable of uniting citizens, nation-states employ various strategies, often orchestrated through the creation of a set of cultural symbols, practices and acts that disseminate a certain image of the 'nation' (Guibernau 2007). The importance of what Hobsbawm (1990) refers to as 'invented traditions' is particularly pertinent in newly established nation states, as they enable the construction of a selective version of the past, made to seem as organic and natural as possible, whether or not it actually took place (Gellner 1997; Hobsbawm 1990). Through time and repetition, these set of practices, which are largely symbolic, become naturalised, thus making it difficult for individuals to trace its invention.

Dress and adornments are some of the most important of symbolic and visual markers in the expression of (national) identity. Not surprisingly, from Scotland (bagpipes and the tartan kilt as the national dress of Scotland) to colonial India (incorporation of 'authentic' tunics, turbans and sashes by the British to Indian dress uniforms) or to Haredi Jewish communities across the world (Yafeh 2007), they are used in the official and/or popular dissemination of a particular community or nation that is 'timeless and authentic' (Hobsbawm 1990). Regulating performances of national identity, through these symbolic markers or invented traditions, are important because when 'enacted correctly' these performances achieve the illusion of 'authenticity' and homogeneity amongst a nation, even if the participants may in fact be a relatively heterogonous group (Edensor 2002), such as in the case of Dubai.

In addition to their 'unifying force', dress codes can also act as symbolic markers of difference in a national community (Gellner 1997). Those who are deemed to be outside the cultural boundaries of national identity might be asked to 'fit' into the hegemonic cultural discourse on national identity in order to enjoy citizenship rights (Beiner 2003, 168). The imposition of certain dress codes and discussions about to what degree different dressing practices should be 'accommodated' in public spaces, such as in the case of 'veil affair' (Meer, Dwyer, and Modood 2010; Mandel 1989) or to a lesser degree other religious symbols such as the Sikh *turban* or Jewish *Yarmulke* (Parekh 2011), often invoke an exclusive account of national community. This is because, instead of stating what the national identity in question compromises of, these accounts refer to a particular symbolic marker of difference. The same markers can also be endorsed -officially and/or popularly- to imply an inclusive account of a particular national identity, often responding to socio-political events.[i]

Although top-down constructions of nationhood, in this case dressing codes and practices, are central in the way boundaries of national identities are formed, they do not tell us how these are celebrated, internalised or challenged by ordinary people (Hobswbawm 1990; al-Dailami 2014, 314). Performing the nation, through the embodiment of national symbols, such as dress, is one of the ways in which everyday nationhood can be understood (Fox and Miller-Idriss 2008, 537). Together with top down processes of national identity construction, these ordinary



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acts by which people mark themselves, constantly (re)define the content of national identities (Guibernau 2007; Fox and Miller-Idriss 2008).

## Performing the nation

The cultivation of national identity, which is otherwise an abstract unit, is achieved through 'incorporating rituals' in which groups transmit ideals and reproduce memory through systematic performances (Connerton 1989). According to Connerton (1989), it is this demand for repetitive performances from participants, where memory and identity become incorporated into the performer or inscribed into the body, which consequently becomes a part of 'social habit memory' (Edensor 2002). These reminders and cues, which are embodied on the group members, act as tools of collective remembering of what the nation is and who belongs to it, whilst aiding to systematically forget other identities that might be in contrast with the national narrative (Chaney 1993, 20 in Edensor 2002).

While performing through a social habit memory might imply reiterative, citational and non-reflexive acts, people also enact everyday performances to achieve particular goals, for example to draw attention to a particular identity they want to present (Goffman 1999). This implies that our performances of identity are relational and situational, and can vary depending on the social context, as well as the people we interact with. For example, if we are contrasted with a rival identity, we may try and seek our authentic selves, whilst if we are in a familiar environment, we may want to emphasise our roots, so in both the cases strive to achieve proximity (Edensor 2002). Such tactical approaches are particularly prominent in the context of my study due to the demographic imbalance as well as the diversity among the Dubai citizens.

Acknowledging the limits to the negotiability of identity and informed by theories of performance (Butler 1993; Edensor 2002; Goffman 1999; Fox and Miller-Idriss 2008), I argue that performing national identity is, to a certain degree tactical, for it is often used as a search for commonality, a tool of negotiating the boundaries, especially for those whose membership to the nation is rather 'ambiguous' (Bechhofer and McCrone 2012; Tufail and Poynting 2013; Bell 1999). Nonetheless, through repetitions these performances may become second nature to nationals and simultaneously create a 'common culture', an emotional bond with fellow members, that determines the genesis and tenacity of national identity, even in the absence of common ancestors (see Edensor 2002; Yang 2000) and at times, of citizenship status. Thus, instead of drawing salient boundaries between reflexive and unreflexive performances, I see an ongoing interplay between them: dependent on time, place and the conditions that shape the regularity of performance (Edensor, 2002).

## 'Cosmopolitan' past of historical port cities in the Arabian Gulf: the case of Dubai

I chose Dubai as a research site, because in the beginning of the 20th century, it was the most populated and 'cosmopolitan' coastal town in the region, engendered through trade, slavery and colonial links, long before the influx of migrants in the aftermath of oil in the 1960s and 1970s (Potter 2014; Commins 2012; Onley 2005). As a result, a large portion of Dubai's inhabitants at the time were immigrant communities from various part of the Indian Ocean, Persia, Arabian Peninsula and Africa, whilst tribal populations were a minority in the city (Martin 2014, 89). While some of these immigrant communities have been naturalised as Emirati citizens (Manal, 2015) and oil wealth 'upgraded' them collectively and positioned



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them as a 'homogenous ethnoclass' against migrants in the post-federation era, it has not changed the internal hierarchies based on socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds (Longva 1997). I particularly focus on Emiratis whose ancestors belonged to some of these immigrant communities.

The official and popular discourses in the UAE, like the rest of the Arab Gulf States, uses historical 'orientalist' depictions of the region to define Emirati citizens to the world (Hawker 2011). These accounts portray Bedouin Arabs as the authentic inhabitants of the UAE and define Emirati national identity through citizenship, one that is premised on shared ancestry and descent among those who are in possession of Emirati passports (see Kanna 2011, 120; Alshawi and Gardner 2013, 47; Vora 2013, 178). As a result, official and popular discourses about who the Gulf nationals are reproduce the idea that these societies are relatively homogenous (Alshawi and Gardner 2013).

Today, the diversity in the UAE is solely attributed to 'post-oil' migrants, who, through their legal exclusion from the national community, have become crucial to the construction and maintenance of Emirati citizenship and national identity (Vora 2013). The rights and privileges of non-citizens in the Gulf States are mainly regulated through the employer-led guest worker programme, *kafala* (Vora 2013)[ii]. The vast demographic imbalance, where migrants constitute 90 per cent of the population in the UAE, is often used as an explanation for strict citizenship policies that do not typically allow naturalization, thereby protecting the socio-economic benefits of citizenship and the 'cultural homogeneity' of the citizens (Vora 2013; Gardner 2010; Ali 2011).

**The role of Gulf national dress in nation-building projects**

Acknowledging the decades-long non-economic nation-building efforts of Gulf States, there is a body of literature in Gulf studies that focuses on state projects of heritage construction (Exell and Rico 2013). This body of literature explore the role of cultural and symbolic markers (see Khalaf 2000 on camel racing, pearl diving and poetry; Khalaf 2005 and Onley 2005 on national dress; Wakefield 2012 on falconry; Holes 2011 for language; Bilkhair 2009 for dance and music; Picton 2010 and Lawson and al-Naboodah 2008 on storytelling); the role of museums and archaeological projects (see Mitchell 2016; Alraouf 2016; Won Jeong 2016; MacLean 2016) as well as architectural restoration projects (Picton 2010; El Amrousi and Biln 2010; Al-Dhaheri 2009) in highlighting an authentic Bedouin, Arab and tribal identity, while simultaneously downplaying the social differences among citizenry.

Within this body of literature, Gulf national dress, *disdasha* for men and *abaya* for women, is highlighted as one of the main 'invented traditions' of the newly established Gulf States (AlMutawa 2016; Kanna 2011; Khalaf 2005; Onley 2004; Mutwalli 2015). In the pre-nation era, while *disdasha* and *abaya* were worn by inhabitants, they were not the only form of clothing in the Gulf (Onley 2004). On an everyday basis, men found the white *kandoora* was limiting to movements and easily stained by dirt, therefore making it difficult to perform their manual labour impractical to perform certain jobs (Vora 2013). In addition, prior to the 1970s, men - especially those of non-Arab origins - mainly wore Indian and Persian clothes and headdresses. These have become obsolete, as *ghitra* and *aqal* (Bedouin headdress) became the predominant headdresses in the 1970s and 1980s (Onley 2004).

Similarly, it was the *burqa* - and not the *abaya* - that was integral to women's clothing in the pre-oil era (Al Mutawa 2016). Mutwalli (2015) argues that while all women wore *burqa*, the

*abaya* was worn predominantly among wealthy women. Other women often opted for colourful, traditional dresses worn under a sheer black cloth. While older Emirati women believe that the *abaya* was an import from Saudi Arabia and was not commonly worn in the past (Zaharias and Leech 2014), a professor of textiles from Riyadh University argues that the *abaya* is a relatively new trend in Saudi Arabia too, which has come from Syria and Iraq less than a century ago (Shimek 2012, 5-6). Regardless, both of these dresses today imply a strong connection to Gulf nationals' authentic past and imagined community.

While the literature on heritage construction, including Gulf national dress, is very useful in the way it enlightens us about the processes of state-sponsored production of national identity in the Gulf, it does not inform us about how these projects are articulated by Gulf citizens. Existing empirical studies that acknowledge the internal divisions within Gulf citizens such as geographical, tribal and sectarian origin, cultural traditions, economic class (see Dresch 2005; Longva 2006,171; Nagy 2006; Kanna 2010; Holes 2011; Alshawi and Gardner 2013; Limbert 2014; Gardner and Zakzouk 2014; Cooke 2014) rarely examine how this affects citizens' claims to and performances of national identity and, when they do, the taxonomy of Gulf citizenry presented in these studies is relatively limited in its diversity (often focusing on settled and Bedouin segments of society; or citizens from Arab and Persian origins). Moreover, the majority of these studies are not based in the UAE.

**Researching the youth in Dubai**

With 40 per cent of the UAE's national population aged between 15 to 34 (Government.ae 2015), focusing on young people offers unique insights into the ways in which this group make sense of, relate to and identify with their national community. Focusing on young Emiratis is not only important because it adds to the limited literature on Gulf identities, but also provides information to policy makers in the UAE which places youth as central to their social and political projects, with a particular focus on preserving national identity (Government.ae).

Over a thirteen month period, I conducted 36 interviews with young Emirati citizens from Dubai aged 19 to 31, carried out 'participant living' and participant observation and re-immersed myself in Dubai life, a setting I was already very familiar with as a result of having lived and worked in the city for four years prior to my doctoral research. Of 36 interviews, 15 were male and 21were female. Those at work were all educated to university level and held positions in banking, film and TV production, journalism, as well as in governmental offices.

19 out of 36 informants identified as Arab. This category included those who identified as Bedouin, urban Arabs, and Emiratis with visible African heritage, as well as those who had roots from wider Arabian Gulf countries such as Oman, Saudi Arabia, Qatar as well as Bahrain. Eight informants identified as Ajam[iii] and/or as having Persian origins. Three informants had mixed families of Arab and Ajam and one Ajam informant had an American mother. Three informants identified as Baloch[iv], one as half Baloch/half Bedouin and another as half Baloch/half Sri Lankan. One participant claimed to have Indian, Somalian and Zanzibari origins from his paternal side, with a mother from England.

All the participants, except for two Emirati informants (Bahraini and Iranian origin) who acquired UAE nationality later in life, were born as Emirati citizens. Emiratis with different migratory backgrounds have arrived in the region as early as the middle of 19th century (mainly Ajamis) and as late as the early 1970s. Yet, typically, the majority of informants stated that

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their families arrived in the region and the UAE from beginning to the middle of the 20th century.

## National dress as a concealer of internal diversity

Majed, a male Emirati informant of Baloch descent, shared the anecdote, quoted at the start of this article, underlining the importance of national dress for his and many other Emiratis' identity. In fact, he called his *kandoora* 'his nationality'. Majed, like many other young Emirati men, likes to dress occasionally in jeans and t-shirts, especially when he needs to run a quick errand in his neighbourhood. On one of these recent occasions, Majed was in a grocery store, shopping with his casual clothes, when an Emirati woman mistook him for an Indian delivery boy working in the shop.

> "She was looking at me and telling me "Bhai, come" (an address to young men in Hindi). I answered: Ana (me? in Arabic)? She said: "ya, taeele! (yes, you, come! in Arabic). When I went up to her and started speaking in Emirati, the woman was embarrassed, her face was all red and she apologised for mistaking me for an Indian. You see, if I wear jeans, they will forget my nationality. This incident was disappointing. I looked at myself in the mirror and thought, do I really look Indian? (laughs). I told her 'ana Emirati, muwatin' (I am an Emirati, a citizen)! I said to myself, I'm never wearing jeans again" [laughs]".

The disappointment that Majed felt in the absence of national dress was similar to the experiences of all my informants, which made them conscious about their everyday dressing practices. This shows the weight that national dress holds in being recognised as Emirati and the precarious nature of such recognition in the absence of this symbolic marker. Thus, at times wearing the national dress becomes a deliberate performance or 'tactical construction', in order to draw attention to one's 'Emiratiness' (Goffman 1999; Edensor 2002). Yet, both male and even more so female Emirati informants also told me that they refrained from wearing their national dress when they intentionally wanted to go unnoticed, for example when men were going to a bar or when women go to the beach in Dubai. This shows that reflexivity and unreflexivity are contingent upon time and place as opposed to being associated with different types of enaction (Edensor 2002).

Moreover, Majed's quotation illustrates the changing perceptions toward different sartorial choices in contemporary Emirati society. Influenced by their increasing links to the West and other parts of the Middle East, from the 1940s to the early federation days in the 1970s, many young Gulf citizens saw the Western style of dressing as a signifier of modernisation and of being educated and worldly. While wearing traditional dress at that time was seen as a practice of the past that was destined to decline with modernisation, the onset of nation building projects in the 1970s, quickly reoriented the discourse on national dress was and the "national dress became the hallmark of citizenship in the Gulf" (Onley 2005,78; Khalaf, 2005), connoting privilege and power for the 'wearer'. This was a response both to a perceived cultural threat of Westernization and to the increasing demographic imbalance that made adopting a unified dress a crucial aspect in marking an Emirati from a non-Emirati.

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However, was national dress sufficient in concealing the most visible differences among Emirati communities, such as phenotypical ones? My informants argued so. While the majority of Emiratis contested claims to national identity by ethnically, religiously or racially different members of Western societies (i.e. of a South Asian British, an Algerian French or Afro-American), they never turned the mirror on to themselves, when I asked what an Emirati looked like. A conversation with Shaima, an Emirati informant that identifies as Arab, illustrates the double standards that informants apply in accepting/rejecting claims to national identity and the weight that national dress carries:

> "We all wear *abaya*, this makes us look the same. In the UK for example, we asked an Indian-looking girl where was she from, she said Manchester, but clearly, she was trying to hide her ethnicity. In the UK, everyone is with casual clothes, so it is easier to see who is really from where".

Shaima's statements were echoed by other informants, who argued that national dress along with other forms cultural performances of Emiratiness, such as language and accent, have naturalised phenotypical differences among nationals. This argument was also shared by Emiratis, such as Maryam, whose phenotypical difference was more visible than for example Shaima, who belongs to a prominent Arab tribe. Maryam is an Emirati of Baloch origin, whose skin colour is black. She told me how she was often mistaken to be another nationality at school, before the age when she started wearing an *abaya.*

> "Before I started wearing *abaya* and *shaila*, everyone would speak to me in English- both Emiratis and non-Emiratis. I was asked constantly if I were Emirati by classmates, despite going to a public school. I'm in a way relieved now that I wear abaya, they know somehow I am Emirati. And definitely relived that I am no longer called Sudanese".

I asked her what being called Sudanese implies:

> "If you are dark, you are called Sudanese. I was one of the few dark students in that school [chuckles nervously]. So, I stood out. It made me think that Emirati look was not what I had but obviously at this age I no longer think so".

It is important to mention that Maryam grew up identifying as Arab, like most of the Emiratis. However, it was when she started socializing at school, she was challenged by her classmates about her self-identification as Arab. Not only does the national dress reaffirm fellow Emiratis of Maryam's Emiratiness, it was also the *shaila* (headscarf), which potentially aided the process by covering Maryam's hair, which indicates her origins in Africa.

In order to maintain the 'homogenous' façade among nationals, Emiratis refrained from wearing traditional clothes that could undermine their efforts to be included in the national community. During my interview with Khawla, another Emirati participant of Baloch origin, she eagerly reached for her mobile phone to show me pictures of her hand-embroidered traditional Balochi dress, sewn by her grandmother. She referred to this dress as one of the most important elements of her culture, which was facing extinction as the new generation did



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not know how to hand-make these dresses. Yet, she seemed rather surprised when I asked her if she wears this dress anytime apart from special occasions, such as out in public.

> "People would be embarrassed to go around with other dresses, a lot of people would make fun, even the Baloch would be like, why would I wear this in public. It shows that you are… cultural…Well, *abaya* is not something women wear in Baluchistan. But when we moved here, we adopted to the culture here, after all it is an Arab country, and this is how they dress".

Khawla's statement illustrates how official and popular discourses on Gulf national dress shape citizens' sartorial choices (Khalaf 2005). Even though the Balochi dress she refers to is central to her collective memory of belonging to the Baloch community, she thinks it is only suitable to wear it in private contexts. By consciously choosing to wear *abaya* every day, Khawla and other citizens become integral to the ways in which the nation is reproduced through repetitive performances of ordinary individuals (Edensor 2002; Hobsbawm 1990). The illusion of commonality among citizens, who otherwise have diverse cultures and traditions, is achieved through these everyday performances, as well as by forgetting other identities that created the state, at least in public domains.

While Emiratis preferred to predominantly identify through their nationality and wear their national dress because it provided them with a secure point of identification, there were occasions during which they clearly expressed their wish to preserve their cultural heritage. While these statements indicated a challenge to the national narrative on Emirati identity, these young Emiratis were not pressing for cultural rights, but merely for the acknowledgment and preservation of the region's cosmopolitan past. For example, a student at the university I taught during fieldwork, who was tasked with presenting Emirati culture, showed up in class wearing a traditional Balochi dress. Similarly, walking down the back corridors of the university, I came across a poster depicting an elegant green dress with a text that read, "Emirati history is diverse and we need to cherish it and preserve it, just like this dress". I was told that the poster was put up by a student of Balochi origin who was keen on preserving fading traditions of her community.

While national dress has largely been successful in concealing the internal diversities in the representation of Emiratis to outsiders, Emiratis are still able to mark each other's' origins through various available codes available to the members of the community. Family names, accents, skin colour, facial hair and features (including shape of eyebrows)[v], were some of the signifiers of difference that were mentioned recurrently in interviews. That being said, to a large degree these differences amongst Emiratis were narrated as 'unimportant' by informants, unless the person in question expressed to have 'inadequate' historical links and cultural affiliation to the Emirati national community. The next section illustrates the contingent nature of inclusions to Emirati national community, irrelevant of citizenship status and attempts in performing Emiratiness.

**Contingent inclusions: Citizenship, historical links and cultural affiliations**

The previous section showed the importance of national dress in the expression of national identity and citizenship by young Emirati citizens. However, national dress on its own was not sufficient to mark one as an Emirati for it needed to be supplemented with other performances





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that suggested long-standing roots in the region. Whether they had citizenship or not, individuals' membership to the Emirati nation was not recognized by fellow citizens and migrants, unless they expressed their historical and cultural belonging to the region through visible markers on an everyday basis.

The recurrent narratives of young Emirati citizens indicated their unwillingness to recognise some migrants' efforts to 'pass as an Emirati' or to accept newly naturalised Emiratis as a part of the nation. Whether real or imagined, these individuals were seen to lack a historical connection to the land, which is reflected in their demeanour, way of walking, their accented Emirati Arabic as well as their 'phenotype'. Alia, an Emirati who comes from a large Bedouin tribe, gave me the following example to elaborate on this point:

> "New Emiratis don't care for being an Emirati, you can see that they will still speak with…for example say Palestinian dialect, have only Palestinian friends, wear Palestinian clothes. Even if they wore national dress, we can still tell who is real Emirati and who isn't. Also, it is quite obvious on their face, they don't look like Emirati".

Considering the existing phenotypical differences within Emiratis, I asked her what she means by Palestinians or other recently naturalised Emiratis not looking like or being real Emiratis:

> "It is difficult to explain but there is something unique about Emiratis. It is the attitude we have. Look, for example even if we see an Emirati with a white skin, we know she perhaps have Persian origins, I mean Ajam, or you can even tell from her eyebrows for example. But with Palestinians or others… Even if they were born in this place or have been for many years, everyone has a tradition from their own region, and we can see it on their face"

This shows legal citizenship alone is not considered sufficient to be accepted as a part of the national community, thus complicating the official and popular discourses that equate citizenship to national identity in the UAE. Whilst resistance in accepting 'new Emiratis' as a part of the nation is predominantly based on the economic and political threats new Emiratis may bring to a 'relatively homogenous' Emirati nation as perceived by Emirati participants, inclusion of other former immigrant groups such as Persians, shows a degree of a common cultural identity that Emiratis see themselves as sharing. This is not to suggest an unquestionable acceptance of all old immigrant groups as citizens. However, it is clear that long historical links in the region and shared cultural experiences, have managed to create a sense of sameness among Emiratis, which is reflected in their performances of national identity. The willingness to accept older migrant communities such as the Ajam as a part of the Emirati national community were often justified on the basis of their 'long enough existence' in Dubai, dating back to the pre-oil and pre-nation hardships and poverty.

Contingencies of this inclusion is best illustrated through the experiences of Ameer, a naturalised Emirati of Iranian origin, whose belonging is often disputed due to lack of symbolic markers of his Emiratiness. Ameer is a second-generation Iranian migrant whose family has arrived in Dubai in mid 1960s during the oil boom, after having lived in Kuwait for 15 years. Ameer and his family were naturalised as Emiratis in mid 2000s. Having been educated in an international school, Ameer cannot speak either Arabic or Farsi. Since he started working in a position that is reserved for Emirati nationals only, he started wearing *kandoora* on a daily



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3 basis. However, Ameer is often confronted by members of the Emirati community for his lack
4 of Arabic skills, despite holding an Emirati passport and dressing as one. Below is an excerpt
5 from his interview, where he explains the confusion the mismatch between his sartorial choices
6 and his cultural proximity creates for the Emirati national community:
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> "Since I started wearing *kandoora*, every time local customers want to see a manager they storm into my office speaking Arabic and I have to explain why I am answering them in English. Same goes with police…Bunch of times I had to deal with police for traffic fines and when I turn up at the station, wearing *kandoora* and not speaking Arabic, they look at me like 'why the hell are you wearing this dress then?' They don't like the fact that I don't speak Arabic".

Ameer's sentiments resonate with the majority of second-generation migrants I interviewed, who typically found Emiratis culturally distant and expressed their lack of interest in performing Emiratiness. On the one hand, this was a result of their legal exclusion from the national community, where they are not allowed naturalisation or permanent residencies, as well as social segregation, where schooling and working is often separated between citizen and migrant groups. In addition, they also expressed their lack of historical and cultural connection to the UAE and its national community, unlike the older migrant communities, some of whom become Emirati citizens. Thus, for my respondents, as seen in the case of Ameer, even if they were granted legal membership, Emiratiness was an identity that they were unable and/or unwilling to emulate.

The case of *bidoon*[vi], the stateless people of the UAE, clearly illustrates the importance of historical and cultural proximity in obscuring the fact of having limited or no legal status in the UAE. Even though *bidoon* lack legal membership, their multi-generational presence in the region and their cultural assimilation to Emirati culture made it impossible to tell them apart from a 'legal' Emirati unless their legal status was disclosed. Mohammad, an Emirati of Baloch origin whose mother works with bidoon students, elaborates:

> "There are people who has been here since UAE was found. I feel bad for them. You know they are born and raised here, they are your friends until you suddenly see their ID one day. I know this guy, he is my friend from high school, he dresses like us, speaks perfect Emirati. I never thought he wasn't Emirati. I was shocked…"

Mohammad's statement reflected the sentiment of the majority of Emiratis I spoke to. My informants typically perceived *bidoon* as a part of the Emirati community, as deserving citizenship, and as contributing individuals who have culturally assimilated to the UAE society because of their long years of residence in and historical links to the land. *Bidoon* performances of Emiratiness were not deliberate, but rather a consequence of their long years of residence in the region and close encounters with the local population. Bidoon perceived themselves as Emirati and took pride in being recognised as such, despite their limited social and legal inclusion in society. Bidoon, as well as some second generation Arab migrants, often underlined their differences from other migrant groups and told me that people cannot pass as an Emirati by simply 'throwing on a kandoora'. Being Emirati for them is actually about knowing the rituals, history and culture of the UAE and even small conventional gestures like 'greeting one another by nose to nose kiss' (Akinci 2019, 12). In this sense, national dress had to be supported by other cultural markers such as accent and dexterity in Arabic, family





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surnames, demeanour, 'way of walking' and at times by particular material possessions that are deemed Emirati.

## Conclusion

Through a case study of Dubai, this article explores the role of everyday performances in the construction and maintenance of national identity and boundaries This article is mostly though not exclusively, concerned with young Emiratis whose origins lie outside the Arabian Peninsula and, consequently, whose membership to the nation might be considered as 'more ambiguous' than those with Arab, tribal and/or Bedouin origins. I show how these social actors, whose families have migrated to Dubai from various parts of the Indian Ocean, Southern Persia, Africa as well as the Arabian Peninsula during 19th and 20th century, make sense of and relate to the national narrative about 'being an Emirati'.

This article illustrates how through the embodiment of their national dress, these groups, , express their identities, negotiate inclusion and consequently (re)produce and consolidate the boundaries Emirati national identity which is popularly imagined as Arab, tribal and Bedouin. The narratives of informants shared here implied that their performances were situational: at times enacted to emphasise their 'Emiratiness' and mark their citizenship status to both migrants and citizens who may mistake them for another nationality. However, beyond 'tactical constructions', these performances were also habitual for Emiratis, continually (re)enacting these performances constitutes a realm of 'common sense', strengthens emotional links and consolidates a sense of belonging among the nationals.

While a significant majority of informants, both citizens and non-citizens, suggested that access to citizenship was central in demarcating the boundaries of the Emirati nation, in this article I show how citizenship rights alone cannot determine the way people identify and are identified by others as being a part of the nation. Those with historical and cultural ties to the Emirates, were able to cross the boundaries of the nation, despite not having full citizenship rights – such as the *bidoon*. In contrast, those who have 'full citizenship' status, yet with no substantial connection to the Emirati national community, were often considered outsiders. This complicates the official and popular equation of citizenship (as legal membership) with national identity (as cultural belonging) in the UAE and weakened the use of citizenship rights as a mean to strengthen national culture.

This article makes two key contributions to the literature. First, it illustrates articulations of an important symbolic marker of Emiratiness through national dress, by Emiratis of different origins. I contribute to the growing body of work on Gulf Studies, which predominantly focuses on the state projects and migrant lives that shape Gulf national identities. By showing citizens as active agents in the reproduction of boundaries and national identity, I emphasise the dependent, intersubjective and interactive process of national identity construction: one that is between the assigned state identity and the articulation of it by citizens. I thereby show how boundaries of the nation is not only demarcated against migrants, but also Gulf citizens, who navigate these complex boundaries on an everyday basis.

Second, by illustrating how similar processes of national identity construction are with the wider literature on contexts of performance and everyday nationhood, I move away from the tendency to approach Gulf societies as 'sociological exception'. Despite perceived differences between societal structures and political cultures between 'West' and the 'Gulf', it is important



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to highlight that cultural content used to define national identities are not primordial and absolute in the vast majority of contemporary societies. Both in the Gulf and increasingly in the 'Western' societies, a presumed common culture is used as a justification for the demarcation of national boundaries, where the perceived economic and political threats immigration poses on the national community are often conflated with cultural ones (Joppke 2007). While a 'subjective belief in common descent' or culture among citizens is crucial for the genesis and tenacity of national identities – as this article shows, the cultural contents that define the boundaries of a national identity are shaped by everyday performances undertaken by citizens, depending on how they articulate, celebrate and challenge national narratives of identity.

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[i] whether the incorporation of different dress codes and adornments are constituted in law- such as in the case of turban wearing Sikhs' exemption from wearing head protection on construction sites in the UK or expressed symbolically in the aftermath of a national crisis, such as in the case of women all over New Zeeland, who wore headscarves to show solidarity with Muslims after the Christchurch mosque shootings (Reuters 2019).

[ii] In late 2018, the UAE Cabinet approved a new system for long-term residence visas in which certain individuals, either sought-after professionals, entrepreneurs or investors, will be offered five to ten years visas (GulfNews 2019).

[iii] In the UAE and most of the Gulf countries, citizens of Persian origins are called 'Ajam', which is an Arab word that historically signified otherness. Persians form one of the oldest and largest migrant communities in the UAE. While there is no available statics, various accounts estimate up to 40 to 60 per cent of Emirates' 'indigenous' population being of Persian origin, of which many are settled in Dubai (Davidson 2008; Kanna 2010,104).

[iv] The immemorial presence of Baloch in port cities of the Persian Gulf positions them as an important community within the 'multicultural mosaic of the Persian Gulf' (Peterson 2013). The term Baluch refers to a major ethnic group that is dispersed across Pakistan's southwestern province of Baluchistan, Afghanistan, and Iran (Peterson 2013).

[v] Despite being disputed at times, it was common to hear that white skin was associated with Emiratis of Persian origin and a darker skin tone and having unibrow with Baloch.

[vi] Bidoon are the inhabitants who have settled in the Gulf region and did not have legal statuses, either because they could not prove their years of residency in the region or simply did not understand the importance of passports at the time (Cella 2014).

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