

Today's Consumption in Egypt

MONA ABAZA

For those of us who grew up in Egypt during the era of Gamal Abdel Nasser in the sixties, we can still recall seeing in our households locally produced consumer durables from the Ideal national company. The stoves, refrigerators, metal cupboards, beds, and desks, while aesthetically unattractive, were functional. In keeping with the principle of functionality, the ruling regime adapted Bauhaus architecture, a German invention born out of a situation of scarcity, to solve the housing problem for Egypt's needy. As for cars, middle class families drove locally assembled Fiats. The few who possessed rare imported luxury goods were looked upon as the elite of the sixties. The socialist oriented Nasser regime had led to the creation of middle classes with consumerist attitudes that were somehow fulfilled by the expansion of a bleak local market. During those long years of Nasserite ideology, the middle classes learned frugality as they joined long queues in front of the government co-operatives which distributed oil, soap, rice, meat and chicken, whenever these goods were available.

Sadat's shift of alliance from the Soviet Union to the Western world in the early seventies was followed by the policy of the "open door," or privatization at the expense of the "public sector" state monopolized large-scale industries. The shift from the Nasserite "state capitalist" era to full integration into the world capitalist system went hand in hand with encouraging consumerism and new lifestyles among Egyptians. Despite major changes in consumer habits, consumer studies are still

During the last decade Cairo has witnessed a flowering of shopping malls, ATM and mobile phone use, resort-style recreation, and fast-food consuming, all of which represent a radical departure from previous Egyptian consumer habits. These new behaviours symbolize Egypt's increasing integration into the world capitalist system, if not its growing participation in multiple dimensions of globalization.

mistakenly considered as a trivial field by most Arab academics. South Asian and Southeast Asian social scientists, in contrast, have developed a much more sophisticated understanding of the interactive processes of consumerism which could inform the research of Arab social scientists.¹ Gendered spaces, youth and religious activism, the problem of scarcity of, and constant struggle over, space in the metropolis

of Cairo are issues that have been under-researched. An understanding of how these gentrified and newly constructed spaces are reshaping life-styles of Egyptians, especially middle-class Egyptians, is crucial. The emerging new lifestyles and consumerism in post-Nasserist Egypt demand attention.

Globalizing Egypt

Cairo alone boasts twenty-four shopping malls, all of which were constructed since 1989, Yamama Center being the first. They have even appeared in the most remote villages of the Egyptian Delta. Cairo's supermarkets such as the French mega-store Carrefour, offer everything one can imagine, from household items, food, beverages to ready-made home-delivered meals. ATM cards, almost unheard of some ten years ago, are becoming popular and ATM users are expected to reach around 10,000 in the next ten years.² The acquisition of mobile phones has risen significantly from 200,000 in 1999 to 4.9 million subscribers today, spurring increasing numbers of thefts and pickpockets of mobile phones. The newly created shopping malls, super hypermarkets, and mega-stores in Egypt are indicative of the dramatic transformation of consumption habits.

Fancy restaurants and bars carrying ostentatious names like: La Bodega, Le Morocco, Le Peking, The Cellar, Justine, Villa Rosa, Cortigiani, Le Bistro Provencale, Sangria, Blues, and Casablanca are also multiplying. For the special occasion of Ramadan international five-star hotels like the Hilton, Marriott and Sheraton compete to offer the best *iftars* (the meal signifying the breaking of the fast) and traditional Ramadan evenings with oriental cuisine buffets, patchwork tents, *shishas* (water pipes) and entertainment that might even include whirling dervishes. The coffee shop culture has also become popular for middle class Egyptians. It would be erroneous to believe that this emerged only in the last decade. In fact, the sixties' bourgeoisie had already adopted the café culture of the pre-Nasserite elite. Simonds of Zamalek, an Italian inspired coffee shop, had been the "in" place during the sixties competing with downtown cafés like Groppi, Lapas, the Indian Tea House, which were frequented mainly by Cairo's elderly. These spaces were typical *beau monde* for parading and showing off. Today, the new coffee houses—and they are plenty—offer a mid-way solution for the younger generation of yuppies who can afford to pay for an over-priced drink, croissant, or a sandwich. Middle class Egyptians have in recent years been exposed to the culture of breakfasting on croissants, espresso and cappuccino's, just as they have learned to eat Japanese, Italian, Thai, Indian, Iranian, and Lebanese food, thanks to the proliferation of restaurants that serve international cuisine.

Hybridized architecture and youth leisure

Leisure resorts, secondary residences, and walled and gated communities, such as Qattamiyya Heights and Bev-

Talat Harb
Shopping Mall,
Cairo



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erley Hills, have multiplied in Egypt. Advertisements sell a simulated dream of grandiose villas located in new, mainly desert, communities outside the city. They are incorporated in larger condominium complexes that might include a swimming pool, a fitness centre, and, the ultimate, a golf course. In other words, everything that leads to a healthy, luxurious, and suburban life, the counter image to the rotting polluted old Cairo. But the fantasy comes with a hefty price tag! For example, the "de luxe" compound "Star Living" in Nasr City's mega project, Citystars, offers model apartments which sell for \$1500-2000 per square metre with the average size of 317 square metres. The two-level penthouses with an area of 1250 square metres sell for an incredible \$2.5 million.³

Most fascinating is how hybridization in design and architecture is being experimented with in the new gated communities and beach resorts. Al-Gouna resort at the Red Sea, for example, was constructed by the Orascom group, one of the most powerful financial groups in Egypt. The man-made al-Gouna lagoon consists of both an assortment of five-stars hotels and privately owned villas. In a brochure for al-Gouna, the architecture gets advertised as "the blending of tastes, where West meets East." Advertisements display the stylish and sophisticated interiors of the villas which might be decorated according to exotic motifs from India, Indonesia, and Thailand, or to western styles.

Architecture, like other aspects of consumer changes, is undergoing global influences in Egypt, but do they represent an emulation or a blending of styles?

At al-Gouna the villa shopper can choose from Italian Tuscany imitations designed by Alfredo Freda to villas with Arab-Islamic accents inspired by the internationally acclaimed Princeton Architect Michael Graves, or pseudo Greek style villas. The "White Villas," designed by the prominent Egyptian architect Shehab Mazhar, emanate a Mediterranean flair. The late Egyptian architect Hassan Fathi, known for his theory of "construction for the poor" advocating the use of authentic traditional designs and local materials such as mud brick, has today been embraced by the new leisurely Egyptian class. Fathi's work had been tremendously inspired by long years spent in studying Nubian art and architecture. Domes, arches, and vaults which were trademark of Fathi's genius revival of traditional architecture are consciously re-popularized in the new resorts and five stars hotels as part and parcel of what Sami Zubaida has called the "folklorization of culture." With a recession taking place and the recent deflation of the Egyptian pound, resorts such as al-Gouna are experiencing real transformation. Large numbers of the new wealthy Russians are purchasing much of the real-estate all along the coast.

Youngsters now have a number of affordable ways to spend time. They could go to the numerous internet cafes, bowling alleys, cinemas, or air-conditioned fast food chains, which are available both, in shopping malls, or as independent spaces. Discotheques and night clubs cater largely to the richer strata. Travel to the Far East has become an exotic tourist destination for the Egyptian rich who discover Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore; international music is widely available, and Arabic music video-clips are becoming increasingly hybridized. Popular satellite channels transmit programs with a "mixing" of, for instance, Indian and Thai dances and landscapes, Egyptian and Gulf young singers, and European and North American tastes and music. Professional belly dancing has attracted a large foreign contingent of Russian, Argentinian, Scottish, Austrian, and American dancers. A local newspaper estimates that nearly 5,000 foreign belly dancers are in Egypt. Curiously, the Russian nationals have the lions share in this profession today. As a result, the government has attempted to nationalize belly dancing by restricting the work permits of foreign dancers.



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El Gouna Resort, Egypt

Fulfillment or frustration?

Does intruding consumer culture, together with its simulative aspect for the poor, serve as an accommodative element with the galloping inflation and growing poverty? Would window shopping and aimless flanerie be sufficient replacements for consuming? Does window shopping, in other words, fulfill dreams or increase frustration? Or, as many have asked, can new consumer possibilities lead to forms of democratization? For example, do mobile phones carry a democratizing effect

since, after all, "everybody" can own one? Today porters, maids, cooks, lower grade employees, and taxi drivers carry mobiles. Admittedly, mobile phones have facilitated communication and made life easier for the lower classes who might not even have home phone lines in their shanty housing areas. Mobiles are no longer a luxury item.

After the Egyptian pound was floated in 2003 and led to a nearly 40% inflation, many ask for how long more can the government hold power? One could argue that these sanitized and modern spaces, like shopping malls, serve merely as "clean air conditioned" spaces for escaping the crowded streets of Cairo, flirting, time spending, and possibly, shop lifting according to the recurring complaints of the manag-

ers of these malls. But today more than ever, the distinction between the haves and have-nots is flagrantly displayed; the boasting of wealth through consumerism can only sharpen class differences.

Observers acknowledge that the main opposition and forthcoming actors in the political arena will be the Islamists. Would these rising social actors adopt an accommodative attitude towards consumer culture or reject it as a form of West-toxication? The example of the young, new-age style preacher Amr Khaled⁴ reflects rather that for young middle class Egyptians most likely, a happy marriage between religion and consumer culture is in the making.

Mona Abaza is Associate Professor at the American University in Cairo.
Email: moabaza@aucegypt.edu

Notes

1. Chua Beng Huat, "Singaporeans Ingesting McDonalds," in *Consumption in Asia: Lifestyles and Identities* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 183-202.
2. Joseph Vess, "Paper or Plastic," *Business Today*, May 2005, 83.
3. *Business Today*, June 2003, 67.
4. Asef Bayat, "Piety, Privilege and Egyptian Youth," *ISIM Newsletter*, July 2002.

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