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Global Products, Embedded Contexts: The Interpretation of Consumption Practices Among Palestinian Migrants in Amman

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Abstract: Amid the frenzied consumption of villas, clothing, technology, and services characteristic of up-scale living in Amman, the most conspicuous of the conspicuous consumers are popularly identified as wealthy Palestinians who entered Jordan in the aftermath of Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990. This presentation will focus on these "returnees" to Jordan – some of whom had never lived in Jordan prior to the invasion – and more specifically, the relationships among their consumption practices, conflicting notions of taste among Amman's elites, and the emergence of a "Gulfie" Palestinian identity. Despite the global aspects of elite Palestinian returnee consumption, a convincing interpretation of its sociocultural importance must make reference to factors embedded in social, political, and economic contexts unique to the Jordanian experience.

Introduction

While a poor country such as Jordan might seem an odd choice for the study of the extravagant consumption practices explored here, a culture of elite consumerism is evident in the capital city of Amman. Although established elites participate in the frenzied consumption of villas, clothing, technology, and services characteristic of up-scale living in Amman, the most conspicuous of the conspicuous consumers are widely considered to be those wealthy Palestinians who fled Kuwait for Jordan following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in August 1990. It is these so-called "returnees" to Jordan – most of whom held Jordanian passports but some of whom had never lived in Jordan prior to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait – and more specifically the relationships among their consumption practices , conflicting notions of taste among Amman's elites, and the emergence of a returnee or "Gulfie" Palestinian identification in the wake of the mass exodus of Palestinians from Kuwait that will form the focus of this paper. At the same time, it is impossible to reach even a preliminary understanding of the

role of consumption in Palestinian returnee identity construction without reference to those elites of both Jordanian and Palestinian heritage whose residence in Amman predated the wave of Gulfie migration, and a significant portion of this paper will explore the interweaving relationships among these disparate groups. [1]

As Veblen famously observed, conspicuous consumption is critical to the expression and creation of status boundaries, and the relationship between consumption and what Bourdieu has termed the struggle to "win" in the social world - to achieve renown, prestige, honor, and so forth - is illuminated well by the patterns of consumption described below (Veblen 1934; Bourdieu 1984:251). At the same time, however, I will argue that the consumption practices that express and inform contemporary standards of taste in Amman are significant in ways that extend far beyond the problem of "keeping up with the Joneses" (or the Husseini's). More broadly, consumption practices such as villa design, interior decoration, and clothing selection and the ideas about taste that inform them instantiate conceptions of membership in various moral and political communities and hence are intimately connected to the construction and reproduction of group identities. I will be particularly concerned with the articulation of Palestinian returnee consumption practices with the category of the modern elite, a topic directly relevant to current elite disputes in Amman over the legitimacy of the returnees' status as citizens of Jordan. This is an explosive issue in a nation where the chasm between a Palestinian majority and a Jordanian minority is widely viewed as a significant threat to both internal political unity and regional stability.

In some respects the consumption patterns characteristic of wealthy Palestinian returnees to Jordan are not unlike those of elites in other parts of the world, given elites' preference for globally-marketed products. It is reasonable to conclude that elite returnees, through their consumption decisions, are implicated in a worldwide system of production and marketing. Yet while consumption of

the variety carried out by elites and the capitalist economy underlying it are global in scope, what is not evident is how participation in global cultural forms alters the dynamics by which individuals construct meaningful group identities.

The changes wrought in the texture of the world's cultural fabric as a result of relatively recent innovations in communication, travel, and capitalization are undeniable. Despite these changes, which have had a tremendous impact on the content of cultural forms within Jordan as elsewhere, I will advance the idea that a convincing interpretation of elite Palestinian returnee consumption from the perspective of group identity formation – despite the far-flung character of the products and hence the global aspects of the consumption itself - must make reference to *embedded* factors of cultural significance emanating from contexts of sociocultural, political, and economic life that are in many ways unique to the Jordanian experience. It is these factors that imbue the consumption of products of Western provenance and global distribution with culturally-specific meanings, providing evidence of the revaluation through local systems of signification of elements participating in global cultural forms (Comaroff 1985:13).

Background

People of extraordinary means exist in many societies, and issues pertaining to elite social positioning and resource consumption are to some degree generalizable across cultures. The wealthy boulevards of West Amman are reminiscent of those of Palm Springs or Los Angeles from the perspective of Jordanians and non-Jordanians alike. At the same time, there are wrinkles, so to speak, in the social fabric of Jordanian life more generally and among Amman's elites more specifically that demarcate this study from a study of wealthy consumers elsewhere in the world. [2]

First, the majority of Jordan's citizens are Palestinian, and tensions between Jordanians and Palestinians are widely taken as constitutive of a potentially nation-threatening cleavage within the overall society (Layne 1994:14). The term Jordanian, when opposed to Palestinian, refers mainly to those people who were living in what is now called Jordan at the time of the nation's founding in 1921 and their descendants. Although the distinction between those living on the East Bank of the Jordan River in 1921 and those arriving in subsequent years from the West Bank of the river may seem clear enough, there had been back-and-forth population movements across the banks of the river for centuries, blurring sharp distinctions between "original" Jordanians and Palestinians.[3] In general usage, the term Jordanian encompasses individuals of both original Jordanian as well as Palestinian heritage in light of the fact that individuals of Palestinian origin enjoy full citizenship in Jordan. Despite widespread scholarly agreement that Palestinians constitute a majority in Jordan today (approximately 55 to 60 percent of the population), the issue of Palestinian numbers remains fraught with political significance (Brand 1995:60; Pappe 1994: 88). The Jordanian national census of 1995, for example, estimated the size of the total Palestinian population, yet the government has refused to make the figures public for fear of fomenting national divisions (Zureik 1996:33).

Palestinian migration to Jordan has been concentrated in three major waves over the last half century: during the Arab-Israeli war of 1947-48, the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, and, most recently, the Gulf crisis of 1990-1991. This last influx in which more than 300,000 Palestinians, most with Jordanian passports, returned to Jordan, primarily from Kuwait but also from Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and the other Gulf States, has had a significant impact on cultural life in Amman, as I will discuss below.

Prior to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, the Palestinians in Kuwait had been one of the most cohesive communities in the Palestinian diaspora (Brand 1988:108). Nearly 400,000 Palestinians were living in Kuwait, a significant number given an indigenous Kuwaiti population of 600,000. Kuwait's discovery

of oil coincided with the Palestinian dispersal of 1947-49, and Palestinian laborers, teachers, and civil servants sought jobs in Kuwait. Kuwait visa requirements were waived for Jordanians in 1958-59, making it possible for many Palestinians to enter Kuwait without prior work contracts. Subsequently, however, a series of Kuwaiti laws imposed increasing restrictions on Palestinian activity. Despite these obstacles, the Palestinian community thrived, with Palestinians occupying the effective core of civil administration and the private sector in Kuwait (Abed 1991:37). Although by no means were all Palestinians in Kuwait wealthy, some Palestinians made fortunes in Kuwait, and these individuals are my focus here.

In the fall following the Iraqi invasion, more than half the Palestinians in Kuwait fled the country, with only 150,000 Palestinians remaining by December 1990 (Lesch 1991:46). Most of those fleeing went to Jordan, while some 25,000 returned to the Israeli-occupied West Bank and another 7,000 to homes in Gaza (Peretz 1993:59). After the war, Kuwait adopted a policy of expelling Palestinians, with no intention of permitting those who left to return. The program to rid the country of Palestinians included such policies as terminating the contracts of non-Kuwaiti public sector employees, expelling from school foreign children (primarily Palestinians) who had attended classes during the Iraqi occupation, and deporting non-Kuwaitis for traffic violations. By mid-1992, less than 40,000 of the pre-war Palestinian population remained in Kuwait (Peretz 1993:60). A more recent estimate puts the number of Palestinians in Kuwait five years after the invasion at only 5,000, just over 1 percent of the original population (El-Najjar 1997).

Palestinians of modest means living in Kuwait faced tremendous hardships in the aftermath of the Iraqi invasion. The Kuwaitis froze Palestinian assets in the country, made almost impossible the procurement of identity cards and license plates necessary for travel, and detained and imprisoned many Palestinians. Wealthy and mobile Palestinians were able to leave Kuwait quickly and with much less

difficulty than their less affluent counterparts. They could afford to fly to Jordan via Egypt, for example, leaving their possessions behind, secure in the knowledge that money in overseas accounts would remain untouched (Lesch 1991:53). Nonetheless, even affluent Palestinians experienced significant trauma inherent in the necessity of leaving immediately a country that had been their home, in some cases for decades, and abandoning their familiar lives. Those who ended up in Jordan went there because they had Jordanian passports and because Jordan would accept them. They arrived in Jordan out of necessity, as outsiders, lacking an identity of themselves as Jordanians – a scenario which would only exacerbate existing undercurrents of hostility between Jordanians and Palestinians in Jordan.

The status of Jordanian-Palestinian relations is a complicated issue, with relations between the two groups waxing and waning over time, in large part as a result of political and economic events within the region and beyond. The closeness of the relationship between Jordanians and Palestinians, given the fact that Jordan administered the West Bank from 1950 until 1967 as well as the obvious fact of the significant Palestinian component of the population, is generally acknowledged by people of all political views in Jordan, with the regime promulgating a strong rhetoric of inclusion and Jordanian-Palestinian solidarity. On the other hand, it is undeniable that the Jordanian-Palestinian divide has been and continues to be an issue of major conflict within the country, with tensions between the two communal groups a persistent if suppressed feature of domestic politics (Brand 1995:46).[4]

In Jordan today the tensions between the two groups are expressed primarily in terms of competition for political power and economic opportunities. The Hashemite regime, in name a constitutional monarchy, was led by King Hussein from 1953 until his death in 1999, at which time he was succeeded by his son, Abdullah. In general, the government views Jordanians as more loyal than Palestinians, with the result that Jordanians are dominant within the army, the internal security services, and within the King's closest circle of advisors. Within the economy, however, Palestinians are

dominant, with such private sector areas as trade, construction, and tourism controlled by Palestinian interests. In the best of circumstances, Jordanians question Palestinian loyalty to the regime and the scope of their commercial transactions; in the worst, they advocate mass deportations of Palestinians to the Palestinian National Authority. From the Palestinian perspective, Jordan remains a tribal-based society in which political perks go to Jordanians, leaving many Palestinians to feel like second-class citizens, even if they enjoy luxurious lifestyles. Particularly salient to this feeling of discrimination among Palestinians in Jordan is the fact that avenues for political expression in Jordan are limited, with Palestinians considered generally unsuitable for positions of significant political power, as noted above. Although Palestinians have occupied important administrative and technical roles throughout the government, they have been largely excluded from positions where they could seriously interfere with the army's defense of the monarchy (Day 1986:80). For the vast majority of Palestinian elites, then, there is little opportunity for action beyond the realm of private enterprise and consumption.

Elite Lifestyles in Amman

Although, as George Marcus has pointed out, the term elite is clear in what it signifies (namely, the rich, powerful, and privileged in any society), it is nonetheless ambiguous as to its precise referents (Marcus 1983:7). Within the social scientific literature, the term elite has been applied generally to groups that have achieved high status within a society for whatever reason (Bottomore 1993:7). In this paper, the term is used to signify individuals possessing superior economic resources such that they are wealthy not only within the framework of Jordanian society but by virtually any standard. Before addressing more specifically the topic of Palestinian returnee consumption, it is necessary to sketch briefly general features of elite consumption in Amman shared by Jordanians and Palestinians alike.

Expansive villas, their design and interiors inspired by Western publications such as *Architectural Digest* and *House and Garden*, copious quantities of European and American designer clothing, luxury cars, personal computers, satellite dishes and other high-tech products are characteristic accoutrements of up-scale consumer culture in Amman. Elites employ guest workers, typically from Egypt, Sri Lanka, and the Philippines, as nannies, housekeepers, cooks, drivers, and gardeners. Wedding parties are an especially important occasion for the display of wealth and are held in major hotels in the capital. The children of elites attend prestigious private schools in Amman that virtually guarantee their students' acceptance by universities (often in the US and Great Britain), graduation from which confers significant prestige (Cunningham and Sarayrah 1993:145).[5] The leisure world of elites is characterized by a level of expenditure that far exceeds that associated with the middle class. A middle class Jordanian or Palestinian family might enjoy a car trip to the beaches of Syria, for example, while an elite family would more likely vacation on the Italian Riviera.

The fact of elites' wealth is evident from their level of expenditure, while the sources of their income are sometimes less apparent. A particular family's relationship to riches may be cloaked in an aura of mystery, a fact at the heart of much gossip in Amman concerning the likelihood that some fortunes have resulted from the illegal siphoning of government funds into private coffers. Yet, as noted above, Palestinians in are denied participation in the highest echelons of government, and have come by their wealth in less controversial ways as a result of land ownership, industrial enterprises, commercial success, or some combination of these. In the case of Palestinian returnees from the Gulf, the sources of their wealth typically lie in ownership of companies in service-sector industries such as banking, engineering, and construction, with operations stretching beyond the borders of the Gulf states into the Levant and beyond.

It is important to note that while Palestinian returnees have been held up in the popular imagination as the exemplars of conspicuous consumption, a culture of conspicuous consumption existed in Amman long before the returnees' arrival. Although some Jordanians, primarily of Palestinian origin, were working abroad and sending remittance money to family members in the years immediately following Jordan's founding in 1921, it was after the increase in oil prices in 1973 that thousands of Palestinians streamed out of Jordan to the Gulf States to work in the rapidly expanding construction and service sectors. By 1975, 28 percent of Jordan's domestic labor force was working outside the country. Foreign remittance figures from Jordanians working abroad increased from 7.5 million Jordanian dinars (JD) in 1970 to 475 million JD in 1984, a figure representing approximately one quarter of Jordan's GNP. By the early 1980's, Jordan was experiencing an economic boom of unprecedented proportions in the country's history, in which direct and indirect aid from the oil-rich countries reached 432.5 million JD, about one-third of the GNP (Razzaz 1993:11-12).

Declining oil prices from 1984 on brought an abrupt halt to Jordan's economic boom, as the precipitous drop in oil revenues translated into dwindling aid from the Gulf States as well as a shrinking labor market, resulting in significantly reduced remittance revenues (Al-Zuhd 1992:55-56; Shteiwi 1995:10). By 1987, negative rates of growth had set in, and Jordan began borrowing foreign currencies in increasing amounts in order to maintain its level of public expenditure and commodity imports. The decreasing value of the JD led to capital flight as investors scrambled to avoid major losses. Between 1988 and 1989, for example, the JD lost 50 percent of its value (Fathi 1994:171-172). The Gulf War of 1991 dealt a further blow to the Jordanian economy, as U.N.-imposed trade sanctions against Iraq had a significant and negative impact on Jordan's shipping and trucking sectors. Despite the contraction of the Jordanian economy from the mid-1980's onward, the Jordanian demand for imports remained strong throughout the 1990's, a fact that can be attributed at least in part to the

consumption demands of the flood of Gulf workers who migrated to Jordan during and after the Gulf War.

Abdallah Bujra has observed that remittance income is frequently associated with new and extravagant consumption patterns, and this is true for Jordan where the period of oil wealth marked the start of a style of conspicuous style of consumption by a highly visible minority of Amman's residents (Bujra 1971:65). The fashionable residential districts of west Amman are generally cited as the epicenter of this sort of boastful or vain consumption (*'al-istihlak 'al-tafakhuri*), exemplified by the construction of outlandish villas which are interpreted by many Jordanians, including elites who choose more subdued lifestyles, as an arrogant assertion of wealth in a poor country. The conspicuous mode of consumption from the 1970's onward is viewed by many as a new phenomenon in Jordan's social history, with the years prior to the oil boom perceived as relatively egalitarian. Although this idyllic vision of Jordanian social life conflicts with scholarly depictions of early Jordanian society as highly stratified, many Jordanians nonetheless enshrine the period prior to the 1970's as relatively free of class conflict and social inequality, despite the presence of other sources of tension and division within the society, namely, the Jordanian-Palestinian schism (Qutub 1970:116). The 1970's and early 1980's thus represent a watershed not only in economic but also in social terms within the country.

Palestinian returnees from the Gulf entered a society in which conspicuous consumption patterns were a well-established feature of city life and in which hostile discourses concerning the inappropriateness of extravagant consumption patterns were in play across diverse sectors of Jordanian society. These antagonistic currents, in conjunction with the intimations of Palestinian disloyalty to the regime that are a persistent feature of Jordanian life, combined to create the popular identification of the wealthy Palestinian returnee or Gulfie as an essentially illegitimate member of Jordanian society.

Modern and Traditional Elites

It does not take long in Amman to realize that relations among elites are antagonistic, that hostility is couched frequently within the idiom of taste, and that wealthy Palestinian returnees are typically identified by long-time residents of the city as the most conspicuous and tasteless of the lot, despite the fact that outrageous villas and luxurious consumer lifestyles predated the Gulfies' arrival. In order to understand in more detail why this should be the case in a city with an established culture of elite consumption, it is necessary to turn to the distinction between Amman's traditional and modern elites, a dichotomy which elites themselves use to make sense of intra-elite relationships and antagonisms within the capital. I have argued elsewhere that differences between the two groups are grounded in the distinction between old and new wealth, with old money identified as that accumulated before Jordan's economic boom years beginning in the mid 1970's and new money as that earned after that period (Beal 2000). From the viewpoint of consumption practices, the crucial distinction between the two groups lies less in the types of products that are consumed than in the manner in which the products are consumed, with the key difference lying in the extent to which consumption is conspicuous to the larger population. This is to say that both groups are voracious consumers of products (contemporary furnishings, gourmet appliances, satellite dishes, CD players, personal computers, and luxury cars) readily identified by most observers as modern, with significant exceptions in the domains of villa design and clothing that I will discuss momentarily, but the manner in which these two groups display their wealth to the larger public is quite different.

Traditional elites are relatively restrained consumers in the sense that they keep the luxuries of their lifestyles behind closed doors, presenting a modest face to the outside world. Traditional elites emphasize the importance of comporting themselves in a manner that would not offend those in less favorable circumstances. The attempt to reduce the *appearance* of socioeconomic inequality is evident

in strategies such as avoiding the conspicuous placement of large homes near busy thoroughfares, refraining from the use of architectural elements of evident Western origins such as pitched roofs and dormer windows, limiting the display of wealth to home interiors, and donning inconspicuous street clothes. This last point applies particularly to women from traditional elite families, who typically veil in public. Traditional elite women are not seen on Amman's streets in the latest imported designer wear. Such practices serve to camouflage elite wealth within the city. Despite (or because of) their obvious wealth, traditional elites engage in a sort of cognitive sleight-of-hand in which they attempt to convince themselves and others that they are essentially like everyone else in the city. To do otherwise would be to promote an intolerable divisiveness within Jordanian social life that traditional elites perceive as undesirable and even immoral.

The importance for traditional elites of blending in with the surrounding community is evident in their characteristic loyalty to the Jordanian monarchy. Traditional elites, Jordanian and Palestinian alike, express not only their loyalty to the King, but also their belief that Jordan is their true homeland. Inconspicuous consumption, within a political context, is construed by old elites as an important indicator of their allegiance to the monarchy and, more generally, of their support for Jordanian national unity. To consume conspicuously would be to arouse the anger and resentment of Jordanians of lesser means, fomenting national tensions and thus making the monarch's job of governing all the more difficult. Loyal citizens simply do not, in the view of old elites, behave in a conspicuous way because such behavior creates problems for the King.[6]

Bourdieu has suggested that aesthetic choices made by individuals are bound up with ethical choices contributing to the constitution of particular life-styles, and this link between the realms of taste and morality is evident in the close relationship between the demonstration of good taste, taken by traditional elites as synonymous with inconspicuous consumption, and an ethical framework privileging

the importance of living in a manner that contributes to overall social harmony (Bourdieu 1984:283). To live in an ostentatious manner amidst the ambient deprivation of Jordanian society is taken by traditional elites to represent not only bad taste and disloyalty to the King but more generally a lack of moral character. The view that the display of ostentatious wealth is evidence of one's immorality is typically couched by traditional elites in religious terms, with relative frugality identified by traditional elites as consistent with their identities as devout Muslims. The idea of morality at issue here pertains to the desirability of promoting social solidarity and maintaining the status quo rather than to an activist approach seeking the reduction of inequities of wealth through resource redistribution. Good taste, a traditional lifestyle, loyalty to the regime, piety, and commitment to the social status quo constitute a constellation of interconnecting elements which help to situate traditional elites both in relation to other elites in the capital as well as to the larger society. [7]

If restrained consumption is associated with good taste and traditional living, then it stands to reason that unrestrained consumption is associated with bad taste and modern living. Women's street clothing is a primary example of conspicuous consumption, with women in short skirts, tight pants, plunging necklines, and stiletto heels a common sight along streets in some parts of the city such as Shmeisani in west Amman. Luxury cars, driven with horns blaring throughout Amman's residential neighborhoods, are another example of the conspicuous consumption that traditional elites abhor. Above all, it is the construction of immense villas in prominent locations throughout the capital that has earned the scorn of traditional elites and helped to reinforce the differences between traditional and modern elite identities.

Home ownership is the most-talked about indicator of the influx of new wealth into the country since the 1970's. Traditional elite homes, as noted above, though exceptionally large and well-furnished, exemplify restraint both in design and in location, often placed a respectable distance from

major thoroughfares so as to escape notice by vehicular and pedestrian traffic. Modern elite homes, in contrast, scream their owners' opulence at passers-by, dominating the landscape not only on account of their large size, but by virtue of their architectural derring-do and their positioning on dominant sites. The ostentatious nature of many of these villas, calling attention to their exterior design, is widely viewed as an intrusion of alien cultural norms, given the emphasis in traditional Islamic architecture on interior rather than exterior space (Grube 1984:10). Modern elites themselves, in contrast, tend not to concern themselves overmuch with the degree to which their villas or their lifestyles more generally conform to Islamic models. This is not to say that religion is unimportant to all members of this group; some identify themselves as practicing Muslims but do not find sumptuous living incompatible with their religious beliefs.

In terms of political affiliation, modern elites express a disregard (or even contempt) for Jordan as a nation, and although they may accord a grudging respect to the Hashemites on account of the royal family's education and sophistication, they reject the unquestioning loyalty to the regime evinced by traditional individuals. By choosing to expend their resources on luxury goods in such a manner as to create a gulf between themselves and their compatriots, modern elites defy the regime's discursive attempts at nation-building, deconstructing the notion of a single unified Jordanian nation through their consumption decisions. The irony embedded in the decision by modern elites to consume conspicuously as a sort of celebration of their "otherness" in Jordan, however, is that in so doing they mirror the lavish consumption practices of the royal family itself and thus mimic the exemplars of Jordanian identification.

Although the Jordanian-Palestinian distinction is typically taken by scholars and the public alike as representing the defining axis of identification within Jordan, the distinction between traditional and modern elites in Amman cross-cuts this line of demarcation. The consumption styles of traditional elites

of both Jordanian and Palestinian origins are indistinguishable according to Palestinians and Jordanians alike. In addition, traditional Jordanian and Palestinian elites are virtually indistinguishable with respect to their political views, with traditional Palestinian elites typically staunch supporters of the monarchy who consider Jordan their home, rather than as a stopping place en route to another destination. One Palestinian man in his early 60's who had arrived in Amman in 1948 and had earned his fortune in banking explained to me:

> I am Jordanian . . . my children are Jordanian. I have my house, my business, my friends, my life here. . . Palestine was a long time ago, a dream. The place where I was born, that's gone now, it's all changed, it's gone forever. I have no future there, my children have no future there. We are Jordanian now. . . .

The situation with respect to the modern elites, however, is more complicated. On the one hand, there are Jordanians (as opposed to Palestinians) who have made their fortunes since the 1970's and indulge in the conspicuous displays of consumption characteristic of modern elites. At the same time, however, it is Palestinians who dominate the commercial sector in Jordan and who have gained the most from opportunities for employment abroad. Hence, the phenomenon of modern elites, along with their flashy consumption styles and association of disloyalty to the nation, is glossed as Palestinian, both by Jordanians and the Palestinians themselves. This overall identification of conspicuous consumption with modern Palestinian elites contributes to a discourse of Jordanian-Palestinian conflict among elites in general as well as throughout other sectors of the society.

The Construction of Returnee Identity

In the wake of the migration of the wealthy Palestinian returnees arriving in Amman from the Gulf in and after 1990, both migrants and pre-existing residents of the city were suddenly confronted

with new circumstances that challenged their previous identifications as members of an elite. The distinction between traditional and modern elites forms what I term an embedded context of significance forged from an amalgam of sociocultural, political, and economic factors that is absolutely critical to making sense of the relationship between consumption practices and contemporary efforts at identity construction within Amman among long-time residents and returnees alike. In using the word *significance* here, with its double connotation of meaningfulness and importance, I am attempting to convey the notion of a cultural value that is essential to the interpretation of social change among a group of people (Sahlins 1981:8). While the forced migration of the returnees resulted from an invasion and subsequent war waged in part out of perceived threats to global military and economic security, and the goods consumed are globally marketed, the significant factors for an interpretation of the relationship between migrants' consumption practices and the construction of group identity in Amman lie not so much at the level of global movements of people, things, and capital, but rather in embedded factors of significance such as the longstanding association in Amman between conspicuous consumption patterns and disloyalty to the nation, the historical animosity between Jordanians and Palestinians, and the pervasive identification within the capital of Palestinian (as opposed to Jordanian) elites with egregious consumption patterns. While one might be tempted to refer to these factors as *local* in scope, the familiar opposition of that word to the term *global* reifies a distinction between cultural elements that proves difficult to document both conceptually and with respect to the lived experience of individuals' lives.

Prior to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, the category of the modern elite in Amman had been occupied predominantly, though not exclusively, by Palestinians who had amassed significant resources in the aftermath of the oil boom of 1973. After the invasion, it was the Palestinian returnees who were quickly assimilated to that category in the imagination of Amman's elites, displacing many of the

individuals who had previously been viewed as offensively conspicuous into the category of the traditional. While the previous line of cleavage among elites had been that between the traditional and the modern, the entry into Jordan of the returnees precipitated a realignment of the previous structure of significance, with the result that both traditional and modern elites found themselves united in opposition to the Gulfies, who were viewed as exemplifying the worst attributes of modern elite life. By out-consuming the modern elites in the imagination of Amman's resident elites, the Gulfies were quickly assimilated into the existing category of the modern elite, with those elites of both modern and traditional backgrounds united in their opposition to Gulfie lifestyles and hence suddenly finding themselves unexpected bedfellows as traditional elites within the city. It is important to underscore here that the terms traditional and modern operate within Jordanian elite discourses in ways that are highly context-specific and not necessarily identical to the ways in which those terms signify cultural content in other parts of the Middle East or in the world beyond.

A brief case study will provide more insight into the Gulfie consumption style and associated political affiliations. Zaki and Samira are a married Palestinian couple in their late forties who reside with their two young sons in a villa of large proportions in the pricey West Amman district of 'Abdoun. Zaki was born in Amman, but resided in Kuwait for nineteen years before returning to Amman during the Gulf crisis. Samira was born in Lebanon, and had moved to Amman, where she met Zaki, as a young adult. Zaki described the family's expulsion from Kuwait in the harshest terms, explaining how he, like many other Palestinians, had been unjustly targeted as an Iraqi collaborator despite the fact that he had spent most of this adult life in Kuwait and considered it his home. In Kuwait, Zaki had headed a successful contracting firm that had boomed along with the Gulf economy in the 1970's and early 1980's. The profits from that business in addition to overseas investments enabled Zaki and his family to enjoy an opulent lifestyle in Amman.

The villa itself, located on a busy thoroughfare, was a spectacular example of what the Jordanian architects Fethi and Mahadin term the cottage style, notable for the prominent use of colored tiles on pitched roofs that dominate the building exterior. Although pitched roofs have long been present in the Mediterranean region, they have never been the tradition in Jordan. The use of pitched roofs by elites like Zaki and Samira serves not only as a conspicuous means of attracting attention to the building but telegraphs a strong endorsement of foreign, notably Western, architectural forms (Fethi and Mahadin 1993:9). In addition to pitched roofs decorated with bright red Italian tiles, the villa boasted dormer windows, gables, and chimneys. Less than three years old, it not only dominated its immediate vicinity but could be seen from a good distance away, a shining beacon of wealth.

Although traditional elites told me that the owners of extravagant villas such as the one owned by Zaki and Samira put all their money into the house with nothing left over for furniture, I found that, on the contrary, big flashy villas were furnished luxuriously. In Zaki and Samira's case, their home was a veritable museum of stunning furniture collected during their travels around the world, with objects from Japan, Pakistan, Peru, and Yemen intermingled with contemporary furniture from the US and Italy. Interspersed among these furnishings were the kinds of imported high-tech consumer products familiar to US consumers - televisions, VCR, personal computer, microwave, and so forth.

Zaki and Samira considered their home as expressive not only of their good taste but also of their cosmopolitanism as sophisticated citizens of an emerging world culture. The villa was identified by both Zaki and Samira as modern with respect to villa design and style of furnishing in deliberate contrast with the homes of traditional elites who "hide their money in their beds because they're afraid the *mukhabarat* (the internal security police) will come and take it away." The restrained consumption characteristic of the traditional elites was thus associated with fearfulness rather than good taste.

With regard to politics, both Zaki and Samira refused to attach much importance to the notion of a Jordanian identity. Jordan, explained Zaki, was very much like the US had been at the beginning of the twentieth century, with the Jordanian population in the middle of a shift from a rural to an urban society. He noted that many of the traditional families had prestige and money, but they hadn't caught up with the modern world. He was surprised when I told him that the traditional elites I knew did have modern conveniences. He then told me a story about the Jordanian state's attempt to settle bedouin in the southern part of the country by providing two-room concrete houses for them. "But these people kept their camels in the houses," he laughed, "while they stayed in their tents!" His point was that there were many people in Jordan who were far from ready to embrace the modern world, and as far as he was concerned, traditional elites who veiled and hid their wealth were part of this old order, an order that included what Zaki and Samira felt was an unthinking acceptance of religious norms as well. Though raised as Muslims, both Zaki and Samira asserted that they no longer considered themselves devout practitioners of Islam. With so many ignorant people clinging to outdated religious beliefs, Samira added, it was difficult to feel at home in Jordan.

Aside from the issue of the backwardness of the population, Zaki and Samira expressed strong reservations about the viability of Jordan as a political entity, an opinion typical of wealthy returnees. "This country was sewn together from little pieces of land that had been controlled by other places like Damascus, Hebron, and Jerusalem. It isn't a country," Zaki explained. "And since we (Palestinians) are the majority here, people are worried about the country's future. Will there even be a Jordan in five years? Maybe it will be divided up among Palestine, Israel, and Syria." For Zaki and Samira, the fact that the majority of the Jordanian population is Palestinian does little to increase their allegiance, as Palestinians, to the country. Instead, the significance of the Palestinian majority lies for them in the

possibility that some portion of what is now labeled the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan will some day become part of an autonomous Palestinian state.

Zaki and Samira were well aware that their ostentatious standard of living set them apart from the majority of Amman's residents and singled them out for criticism as outsiders without regard for the sensitivities of both Jordanian and long-time Palestinian residents. Their attitude, however, was one of defiance, of resistance to what they perceived as attempts by meddling outsiders to control them, their resources, and their right to choose a lifestyle in keeping with their own taste and background, with the result that they felt a reinvigorated determination to proceed apace with their conspicuous consumption. Like Zaki and Samira, many wealthy returnees upon their arrival in Amman have experienced a hardening of their resolve to resist what they perceive to the be intrusive nature of resident Jordanian interest in their affairs. Their emergent identity as defiant and unyielding Gulfies has developed out of the context of the intense antagonism to their lifestyles that they encountered in Amman. Thus individuals who perceived themselves in Kuwait to be conservative bulwarks of the economic order find themselves under their new circumstances to identify more strongly with a militant disregard not only for the opinions of their neighbors but more broadly for the affairs of their homeland.

While the resistance of the wealthy returnees to assimilation within the larger society is taken by traditional elites as a sign of immorality, the returnees do not perceive their consumption practices in such terms. Instead, returnees perceive themselves, conspicuous lifestyles and all, as participants in a modern and increasingly global world that has destroyed whatever incentives there once might have been for traditional allegiances. To be traditional in this view is to fail to understand and appreciate the rapidly changing world in which, as Zaki put it, “you must be ready to go anywhere, do anything - you cannot close your eyes and hide in the sand here.” It is not so much that returnees behave without regard to guidelines for principled behavior, as the traditional elites suppose, but rather that the returnees

have cast their lots with what they take to be a global, as opposed to a Jordanian, community. Given the traumatic migration experiences of the Gulfies, it is perhaps not surprising that many returnees are deeply skeptical of the utility of placing their faith in the Hashemite monarchy, or in Jordan as a nation, or in anything other than their capacity to survive in the world through their own initiative and resources. Wealthy returnees are thus not particularly concerned with behaving "appropriately" as restrained and subdued Jordanians because they do not consider themselves Jordanian in any meaningful sense, but rather look beyond Jordan's borders for resources from which to forge their identities as well as the foundations of their material success.

Conclusion

Group identities, even those emerging from cataclysmic events of population displacement and intimately bound up with global consumption practices, arise out of embedded contexts of significance and can be interpreted as such. While the events resulting in the entry of some 300,000 Palestinians into Jordan during and immediately after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait have global antecedents, and while the returnees themselves embrace the consumption of globally-marketed products as one component of their identification with the world beyond the borders of Jordan or even the Middle East, it is the structure of significance expressed through the dichotomy of the traditional and the modern that has given both pre-existing elites and migrants alike a framework through which to make sense of their altered positioning vis-à-vis other elite groups. This framework, which serves as a means of categorizing one's position in relationship to other elites within the capital, is itself rooted in a series of sociocultural, political, and economic factors specific to Jordanian life.

To argue that a structure of significance provides a framework through which individuals in a historically novel situation attempt to make sense of their identities in relation to other groups is not to

say that the structure itself is impervious to change, resulting in the stereotypic reproduction of cultural values. An event of the magnitude of the entry of 300,000 Palestinians into Jordan has its own dynamics which redefine the identities of those participants in it. These redefined identifications then work back upon the structure of significance, with resulting changes in the cultural values of the community (Sahlins 1981:35). In the case presented here, it is the categories of the traditional and the modern that provide the basis for the repositioning of elite identities, with Gulfies assimilated to the category of the modern and resident elites from both groups assimilated to the category of the traditional in the imagination of the returnees themselves. At the same time, the content of these categories changed significantly, as individuals previously identified and identifying with a modern group identity found themselves in an unprecedented alliance with traditional elites in opposition to the Gulfies.

It has been argued that identities in the contemporary world are increasingly characterized by what Appadurai has termed *deterritorialization*, namely, the increasing operation of groups in ways that transcend territorial boundaries and identities (Appadurai 1991:192). The possibility that the means by which groups go about constructing their cultural identities have changed irrevocably in a world beset by forces of globalization has led to the gloomy prognostication that the discipline of anthropology, with its attendant assumptions about the significance of culture and the necessity for patient study among a particular population, is no longer up to the job, so to speak, of making sense of the world. In demonstrating the persistence of embedded factors to the construction of group identities in the face of significant dislocation, I have tried to convey the perduring importance of cultural values even during periods of enormous social upheaval and hence, to my mind at least, the continuing relevance of anthropological investigation to the interpretation of human affairs.

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Notes

1. The research on which this paper is based was conducted in Amman during 1995-96. My research activities ranged from the relatively formal (merchant surveys, homeowner interviews, school tours) to the decidedly less formal (sharing meals, helping children with their English assignments, watching videos, attending weddings, and shopping). In keeping with standard anthropological practice, informants' names and details of their backgrounds and current circumstances have been altered to ensure anonymity.
2. Jordan is a small country with an estimated population of 4.4 million people and an economy of a little over U.S. $6 billion (*Jordan Diary* 1998:75; Minhas 1995:67). The last several decades have witnessed the increasing urbanization of the country, with the percentage of the urban population increasing from approximately 44 percent in 1961 (Saleh 1991:26) to approximately 70 percent by 1993 (*World Tables* 1995:387). The vast majority of the country's inhabitants are Sunni Arabs and are concentrated in the central and northern regions of the country in the governorates of Amman, Irbid and Zarqa, which together accounted for 83.8 percent of the population in 1985 (Saleh 1991:25). The largest city is Amman, with an estimated population in 1995 of 1,183,000 (*Human Development Report* 1996:176).

   The Jordanian economy is primarily a service economy, with the percentage of the labor force engaged in the service sector expanding from 29 percent of the labor force in 1961 to 61 percent in 1990 (*Human Development Report* 1996:168). With few natural resources, Jordan has had to rely heavily on the development of its human capital, and the country's literacy rates are among the highest in the Arab world, with adult literacy in 1993 standing at nearly 85 percent, up from 33 percent in 1960 (*Jordan Diary* 1998:59; *Human Development Report* 1996:136). Given the youthfulness of the population, with 42.2 percent 14 or younger, and 31.4 percent falling between the ages of 15 and 29, almost one-third of all Jordanians are enrolled in some form of school (*Jordan Diary* 1998:58).
3. The historian Beshara Doumani, for example, has documented the movement of one family, the al-Jarrars, from the al-Balqa region on the East Bank to the area of Palestine around 1670 (Doumani 1995:37).
4. Palestinian raids from Jordanian territory into Israel created difficulties for the Jordanian regime from as early as 1948, as such raids were met by potent Israeli reprisals. Palestinian raids increased so drastically in 1965 after the founding of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) that Jordan banned the PLO in 1966, although the PLO continued to operate within the country illegally. In 1970, King Hussein was ambushed by a PLO force, an act which precipitated Jordanian army attacks on PLO units. In September of 1970, known among Palestinians as Black September, King Hussein sent the army into action against the PLO, leading to the elimination of PLO militias within the country by the following July (Day 1986:31-33).
5. More than ninety percent of graduates from the American Community School (ACS) in Amman, an exclusive private school which counted two of King Hussein's children among its students during the 1995-96 school year, go on to the university level, with most of those going to schools in the US. Total enrollment in ACS during 1995-96 was 421, with approximately one-third of these Jordanian citizens (encompassing individuals of both Jordanian and Palestinian heritage). To take another example, two-thirds of the graduates of the Amman Baccalaureate School (ABS), another well-known private school, go on to universities in the US, with the remainder going primarily to England. Very few remain in Jordan for advanced studies. Total enrollment in ABS during 1995-96 was

1,008, with 81 percent of the students Jordanian citizens. (Data based on separate interviews with Brian Lahan, principal of ACS, and Samia Al-Farra, principal of ABS, conducted by the author on 13 December, 1995).

6. My comments on political loyalty are based on research conducted during the reign of King Hussein, who died in February 1999 after a protracted struggle against cancer. It appears that Jordan's current monarch, King Abdullah, continues to enjoy the broadly-based popular support accorded his father. It is not clear whether this support reflects loyalty to Abdullah, to the memory of his esteemed father, to the institution of the monarchy itself, or some combination of these factors.
7. The discussion here of the relationship between taste and ethics among elites resonates with Bourdieu's analysis of the ethical aversion of the French petite bourgeoisie to 'art for art's sake', an approach to aesthetics which is seen by certain fractions of the bourgeoisie as demonstrating an immoral separation of the artistic sensibilities of artists and intellectuals from the concerns of social life. Bourdieu's assertion that taste perceived as divorced from social issues is construed as immoral by some individuals appears valid within the Jordanian context, as traditional Jordanian elites perceive their taste as better (and more moral) than that of new elites precisely because of its sensitivity to larger social issues of inequality and class stratification (Bourdieu 1984:48-49).

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