

Pious Entertainment Al-Saha Traditional Village

MONA HARB

Lebanon is well known for being a major tourist attraction for Arabs and foreigners, who enjoy its position as a “bridge between East and West” and who are seduced by its advertised function as the “Paris of the Middle East.” During the post-war reconstruction period, Lebanon’s main priority was to confirm this service role and to enhance its infrastructure for tourist attractions. Large public and private investments were made towards this aim: the reconstruction of Beirut’s downtown, the building of highways and roads, the restoration of major archaeological and historic sites, as well as the development of a variety of consumption venues such as cafés, restaurants, beach resorts, hotels, and amusement parks. Away from mainstream tourism avenues, in the southern suburb of Beirut, alternative forms of entertainment have been developing for other types of constituencies.

In the southern suburb of Beirut (*al-Dahiya*), away from mainstream tourism avenues privileged by the post-war reconstruction agendas of Lebanese entrepreneurs and elites, alternative forms of entertainment have been developing for specific types of constituencies. Fifteen years after the organization of the “Islamic sphere,” under Hizbullah’s umbrella, into financial, political and social networks, new places providing the pious with popular culture services have been multiplying in al-Dahiya. “Al-Saha” belongs to this world of pious entertainment and forms an interesting case-study for understanding the cultural features of the Islamic sphere in Lebanon.¹

Flanked by a gas station (also owned by al-Mabarrat), the building stands in the landscape of al-Dahiya as a strange addition that does not relate to the context: its façades are covered with carved stones, domes stand out from its ceiling, a minaret-like structure appears from within its volume, architectural elements and features that the public is accustomed to seeing in nineteenth century historic buildings of Mount Lebanon are pasted here and there. The ensemble was designed by Jamal Makki, an architect heading the architectural firm of al-Mabarrat. He clearly spells out his vision for al-Saha:

“Al-Mabarrat needed a financially productive project. I started thinking about a project that would fit the role given to the city of Beirut. Tourism seemed like an appropriate choice. However, how would you make a tourism project in a site that has no tourist assets?! There is no sea and no mountains here! Moreover, we are in an area known for its ugliness and its urban pollution. So, I thought of creating a project turned inwards and which acts as a tourist attraction in itself. I wanted something everybody would visit: Lebanese, Arabs, foreigners. I started thinking what is the *idea* [in English] that could mobilize a mosaic of different publics? ... Of course, it is nostalgia, history, tradition! Everybody feels good about remembering history and tradition! People travel to Spain to admire Islamic and Arab architecture!”³

The project is, without doubt, impressive in its scale and in its density of details. The interior conveys a “traditional village” mood that is enhanced by a multitude of features and objects that appeal to the collective memory of the visitors and to the perceptions they probably have of Arabic and Islamic heritage. The architect explains that the challenge was to translate the concepts of history and tradition into elements that materialize their meanings to people:

“I was inspired by the books of Anis Freiha [a famous Lebanese novelist who has written extensively about Lebanese traditional village life]. I took all the descriptive elements from Freiha’s books and materialized them in built form, in architectural details, and through artefacts and objects. Here you have Abou-Ahmad house, and here you have Abou-Khalil house, this is the well of the village, this is the *‘alliya* (terrace), this is *al-saha* (the open space)... All the objects you see here are mentioned in his books. I want to show that Anis Freiha was right: the village life is the genuine true life that inspires good and generosity. Rida was wrong [in reference to Freiha’s son, who rejects his father’s nostalgia in his famous book *Isma’ ya Rida*, and tells him that the village life is fake and full of romantic lies]. This project is about the values of the Lebanese traditional village, and how these values will invade the city!”

Hybrid meanings of tradition

The meanings of tradition in al-Saha are multiple and hybrid, borrowing meanings from varied sources. First, tradition is Lebanese, as portrayed through the reference made to Anis Freiha. Interestingly, Freiha’s romantic narratives of the old Lebanese village have inspired various national popular culture productions, which largely privilege Christian representations of (Mount) Lebanon, at the expense of other histories. Thus, the spatial and physical materialization of tradition through Freiha’s narratives for the purpose of creating an Islamic friendly environment highlights a clear claim to the Lebanese traditional values. Second, tradition is Arab and Islamic (both levels are confused in the discourse): al-Saha proudly claims its belonging to an Arab/Islamic world,

The southern suburb of Beirut, labelled al-Dahiya, is inhabited by half a million residents, mostly Shia. For the past fifteen years, al-Dahiya has been operating predominantly under the management of Hizbullah which organizes service delivery to its residents through its elected local governments as well as its network of social institutions. Under Hizbullah’s umbrella, an Islamic sphere has emerged organizing social and cultural practices in al-Dahiya around a variety of piety principles. Analysis of the features of this sphere goes beyond the scope of this paper. In recent years, the Islamic sphere has been materializing into new physical places providing entertainment services to the pious, such as restaurants and cafés, amusement parks, sports centres, private beaches, exhibition halls and summer youth camps. Al-Saha Traditional Village belongs to this world of pious entertainment and forms an interesting case study for understanding more closely the cultural features of the rising Islamic sphere in Lebanon.

Building heritage in al-Dahiya

Inaugurated in 2001, al-Saha is located on a major urban artery linking the international airport of Beirut to the renovated city centre. The Traditional Village includes, on a surface area of seven thousands square metres restaurants, cafés, terraces, shops, a wedding hall, a motel, a small museum, a library, a children’s playground and prayer rooms. Al-Saha does not serve alcohol and provides an environment complying with pious Muslim practices, or what are commonly referred to as *shar’i* practices. Al-Saha is managed by al-Mabarrat, a philanthropic organization led by Sayyed Mohammad Hussein Fadlallah,² who also administers an array of education and charity associations for orphans and needy children. All profits made by al-Saha go to al-Mabarrat.

Al-Saha is designed according to a representation of “traditional” Arabic and Islamic architecture.

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renown for its poetry, its music and its arts and aims to show that "Islamic groups in Lebanon can participate to the production of culture and heritage in a superior way."⁴ Its goals have been met, as the project was awarded in 2005 an architectural prize by the Arab Cities Association for its "daring design and its contribution to traditional architecture."

Tradition in al-Saha is not only physically materialized for reasons of identity or for the pleasure of aesthetics. As the architect reminds us, "Tradition is profusely displayed in al-Saha to force itself upon the users so they learn about their origins and their identity while they are being entertained." Thus, the mission of al-Saha seems to be also educational and aims at dealing with its consumers as active individuals/"citizens." For that reason, al-Saha is setting up an Arabic poetry library which will be part of a network of Arab poetry houses, and will also act as a meeting place for poets. In addition, al-Saha prides itself on hosting specific types of musical performances, such as *zajal* (a specific type of collective chanting that praises traditional Arab values of pride, honour and nationhood), as well as *anashid* (songs which convey messages related to religion, identity, and resistance).

Since its opening in 2001, with one restaurant, al-Saha has been a rising success: al-Mabarrat did not expect such high financial returns. Rapidly, the project expanded to include the variety of services it includes today, and is still planning further developments within the Village itself, but also beyond national borders, as al-Mabarrat will be opening a branch of al-Saha in Qatar. Today, the Village attracts between 700 and 1,000 users daily: families and couples, youth and elderly. Several associations hold their fundraising activities in al-Saha as well. The variety of dress codes reveals the eclectic profiles of users. Though al-Saha is a "pious" place, its customers do not all abide by the pious dress code (several women are not veiled and dressed provocatively while men follow fashionable dress and hairstyle codes not particularly compatible with Islamic norms). Users of al-Saha mostly spend time eating, chatting, gazing and smoking hubble-bubble. They are often gathered in family groups, although exclusive female or male clusters are found. Typically, youth groups take their own tables and spend their time playing computer games, surfing the Internet or chatting on laptops rented from al-Saha. There are also many tourists, Arabs as well as foreigners, especially during holidays and summers. The large numbers of pious Arabs discloses the recent growth of the transnational demand for an entertainment respectful of Islamic codes and values and simultaneously characterized by quality and aesthetics.⁵

How to explain such a success? In a city where public spaces are scarce and have been increasingly replaced by private spaces of consumption, such as cafés, restaurants, shopping centres and malls, al-Saha's ability to attract such a large and varied number of users is not very surprising. Located in a dense area housing half a million people, of mostly middle-income, al-Saha meets the demands of a big pious clientele, wary about its Islamic identity and in need of entertainment. As one of our informants told us: "Who said that pious Muslims do not want to have fun?! We are in more need for fun than anybody else."⁶ Moreover, al-Saha provides pious Arab tourists with opportune spaces to spend their money (for Islamic charity) and their time (learning heritage through consumption), while granting foreign tourists an exotic flavour of "traditional" heritage mixed with the "thrill" of being in the notorious al-Dahiya. Indeed, al-Saha also aims at proposing an alternative image of al-Dahiya which is stigmatized as the Shia ghetto of the capital, or also the stronghold of Hizbullah: the project "encourages visitors to come to a place of the city that always inspired fear and to see that it is just a part of the city."⁷



PHOTO BY MONA HARB, 2005

Consuming piety?

Al-Saha reveals and materializes a culture that has been hidden to the eyes of the Lebanese and to those of the average tourist. In this sense, it provides an alternative entertainment experience to the visitor—an entertainment rooted in an eclectic mélange of Lebanese, Arab, and Islamic "traditions", imbued with an "educational" message about the value of heritage and of piety. In addition, al-Saha discloses the extent to which the Islamic sphere in Lebanon has become part of an every day life for many and how this sphere holds transnational linkages with other pious publics.

However, several questions arise about how these forms of entertainment, largely rooted in consumerism, affect pious practices and, more generally, the Islamic sphere they relate to. Is the Islamic sphere losing its moral authority and legitimacy by accepting the market logic of consumption? Is al-Saha related to "the rising phenomenon of religious consumption within the wider context of increasing consumerism and the global market" like Abdelrahman explores in the case of Egypt?⁸ Will such places lead to social polarization within the Islamic sphere and reveal hidden social inequalities? Or will we observe, on the contrary, a reinforcement of the Islamic sphere, which is carving its own niche within the popular culture landscape, and thus appealing to a broader potential constituency? More fieldwork on the practices of consumption and the processes of commodification are necessary before we attempt to answer those questions which will guide our future investigations.⁹

Mona Harb is Assistant Professor at the graduate programme in Urban Planning and Policy at the American University of Beirut. Email: mh22@aub.edu.lb

Shopping alley at al-Saha village, Beirut, 2005

Notes

1. This article is part of a larger paper presented at the ISIM workshop (In)Visible Histories: The Politics of Placing the Past, Amsterdam, 2-3 September 2005.
2. Al-Saha is thus not managed by Hizbullah. Sayyed Mohammad Hussein Fadlallah is an independent Shia *marja'yya* (reference). It is however agreed that Fadlallah and Hizbullah belong to the same Islamic sphere.
3. Interview, Architect of al-Saha, 19 August 2005.
4. See N. Al-Sayyad, ed., *Hybrid Urbanism: On the Identity Discourse and the Built Environment* (London: Praeger, 2001), 5.
5. See A. Al-Hamaneh and Ch. Steiner, "Islamic Tourism: Rethinking the Strategy of Tourism Development in the Arab World after September 11, 2004," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle-East* 24, no.1 (2004): 173-182.
6. Interview, Head of the Educational Mobilization Unit of Hizbullah, 19 August 2005.
7. Interview, Architect of al-Saha, 19 August 2005.
8. See M. AbdelRahman, "Consumerism, Islam and Fashion in Egypt Today" (2005, unpublished paper).
9. This preliminary work is part of a larger ongoing research project on the cultural productions of the Islamic sphere in Lebanon undertaken with Lara Deeb, Assistant Professor at Women's Studies, UC Irvine.