

Literature and Music as Serious Pursuits in the Arab-Iranian Middle East and North Africa

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Professor Robert A. Stebbins, with 40 years in leisure studies, has pioneered the ideas of 'serious leisure', 'casual leisure', 'project-based leisure' and 'optimal leisure'. He is currently Faculty Professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of Calgary. Author of 41 books and monographs in several areas of social science, his most recent works bearing on these ideas include: *Between Work and Leisure* (Transaction, 2004); *A Dictionary of Nonprofit Terms and Concepts* (Indiana University Press, 2006, with D.H. Smith and M. Dover); *Serious Leisure: A Perspective for Our Time* (Transaction, 2007); *Personal Decisions in the Public Square: Beyond Problem Solving into a Positive Sociology* (Transaction, 2009); *Leisure and Consumption* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); *Serious Leisure and Nature: Sustainable Consumption in the Outdoors* (Palgrave Macmillan 2011, with Lee Davidson); *The Idea of Leisure: first Principles* (Transaction, 2012); and *Work and Leisure in the Middle East* (Transaction, 2013). He was elected Fellow of the Academy of Leisure Sciences in 1996, Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada in 1999, and Senior Fellow of the World Leisure Academy in 2010. He has been a member of LSA since 1995.

Stebbins's main leisure interests lie in amateur music, where he is a jazz and classical double bassist, and in various outdoor hobbyist pursuits, notably cross-country skiing, snowshoeing, and hiking and mountain scrambling (hiking to mountain tops). He is also an active volunteer in the Calgary French community, most recently as President of the Centre d'accueil pour les nouveaux arrivants francophones (an organization that helps French-speaking immigrants settle in Calgary). And, to be sure, casual leisure counts as well. For Stebbins it consists mainly of evening conversations with friends and family and dining out in Calgary's restaurants.

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This article, more than any I have written in the Leisure Reflections series, is an unabashed promotion of a forthcoming book of mine: *Work and Leisure in the Middle East: The Common Ground of Two Separate Worlds* (Stebbins, in press). My justification for presenting something in this series soon to be published is that this extract illustrates well certain urgent issues in leisure studies centred on: 1) the level of complexity and profundity that leisure can assume outside the West; 2) the ways in which Western leisure activities are integrated into local culture and 3) the constraints imposed on leisure when religious and political authorities see it as subverting the status quo in their domains.

This paper samples two main kinds of leisure activity in the Arab-Iranian Middle East and North Africa (MENA), activities also pursued the world over.¹ They are literature and music. Interest in some forms of these two is sometimes controversial, but not always. Where appropriate I use the serious leisure perspective to frame and interpret the genre of literature and music under consideration.

Literature

Roger Allen (2011) has observed that, at the turn of the twenty-first century, the Arab creative writer was working at a local level under difficult circumstances buffeted by state dominance in the form of limited freedom of expression and by religious and governmental censorship. Today, many prominent Arab authors have for political reasons spent large segments of their lives in exile from their homelands. *Wikipedia* (2011) elaborates on this situation, noting that some writers, whose works have somehow offended the theological or political authorities, if not both, have wound up in jail. For example, Egyptian Nawal el-Saadawi who, given her controversial views on women's rights, was imprisoned in 1981 for her books on the subject. Others, writing in praise or at least tacit support of these same authorities, have been given influential positions in cultural organisations.

Allen (2011) describes the content of today's Arab literature. He writes that the movement toward a contemporary literature started in the nineteenth century, fuelled by contacts with the West and a renewed interest in the great Arab classical works. More particularly, after Napoleon invaded Egypt in 1798, an autonomous, western-oriented dynasty took root, which became a magnet for many Syrian and Lebanese writers. For Egypt at this time offered the freest literary environment of the region, making it the centre of the renaissance of this art. When the Ottoman Empire ground to a halt at the end of World War I and independence came to all Arab countries following World War II, the revival spread to them as well.

These socio-historical conditions gave rise to such European genres as the short story and the essay as well as some new forms of verse, all fashioned, however, on a foundation of the classical Arab literature. The novel and the drama constituted other imports from the West. It was through translation in the nineteenth century of Western works that these forms became available. Allen states that this renaissance was probably fired by two forces operating in the MENA: the advent of the printing press and the rise and modernization of education. Concerning the first, it 'made writing a realistic livelihood and forced writers to abandon the traditional,

ornate style of past centuries [i.e., Arabic/Iranian calligraphy] in favour of a simpler and more direct style that would appeal to a wider reading public' (Allen, 2011).

Could this not have been the point at which Arab literary writing moved from being a hobby to being an amateur/professional pursuit and offering thereby a work career for a much larger number of writers than the sporadic patronage arrangements of the past (described in Stebbins, in press, chap 3)? Today, even with censorship ever in the wings, professionals exist upon whom amateurs may pattern their own writing style and career in a serious pursuit. Moreover, there is now for the liberal arts hobbyist, a literature on which to develop some expertise as a buff, and for the casual leisure fan of novels or poetry, for example, an available source of entertainment.

Poetry, always a main form of communication in Arab society, became to some extent politicized in a special way following the founding of Israel in 1967. Since then the plight of the Palestinians has been the subject of poetic inspiration, with many of the writers in this area themselves being Palestinian. Allen (2011) notes that some of these poets write about the losses and defiance of their countrymen and about their aspirations. Others write to express their commitment of revolutionary change. Such literature has buoyed up the reception of poetry in general in Arab society, doing so in face of the powerful attraction in modern times of global communication and of entertainment television, video, and the Internet. Nevertheless, Arab poetry still struggles to find its place in the public domain, Allen says, even though in political crisis, it is the poets who can be counted on to reveal the conscience, pain and dreams of their brothers and sisters.

Music

Arab music retains to this day a certain common ground, seen in, among other features, an enduring link with Arabic and use of various micro-tones more finely divided than the half- and whole-tones on which Western music is based (Racy, 1992). Arabic rhythm is another enduring facet of the music. The rhythm stands out for its patterns of beats (2 to 24 or more) and variations in timbre, such as achieved by striking a drum head at different places.

Arab folk music is, today, a main expression of this musical heritage. It varies somewhat from country to country and even from region to region within countries, for after all, such music invariably emerges from local cultural circumstances. Kay Campbell (2007) describes contemporary folk music in Saudi Arabia, which by the way, is often presented as poetry and embellished with song and dance. The 'ardah provides an example:

The 'ardah is one of many Saudi folk-music traditions that Saudis refer to collectively as *al-funun al-sha'abiyyah*, the folk arts, or more simply, *al-fulklor*, folklore. Varying by region, and again by town and city within each region, individual traditions are known as an art (*fann*) or type (*lawn*). Many combine song with drumming, clapping and group dancing. Performers wear regional costumes and sometimes dance with props, such as the sword in the 'ardah or the bamboo cane in the Western Province's *mizmar*.

Scott Marcus (2006) provides an overview of contemporary *mizmar* folk music in southern Egypt.

Campbell (2007) reports that many of the folk arts are thriving in modern Saudi Arabia. Studying them in the evening is a serious pursuit for many youth. Moreover, some of them find an outlet, remunerated or not, in providing folkloric entertainment at weddings. It seems to be expected that a modern wedding party will have a show of this nature. Performers in these troupes may be young or old, if not a mixture of both, and amateur or professional. The appeal of this variety of entertainment, which is flourishing today, spans the age spectrum.

In addition to a great love for their folk music, Saudi youth are also enamored of the world music scene (Campbell, 1999). Similar to their peers everywhere in the MENA, young Saudis listen enthusiastically to pan-Arab and Gulf-style pop music. It is broadcast via satellite, which carries such networks as Saudi Arabia's Rotana, and the Arab networks of Ibc (Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation) and MBC (Middle East Broadcasting Center), among others. In their minds there is nothing incompatible about finding both genres attractive. According to Sebastian Usher (2007), in writing for the BBC, modern Arab youth are also rallying these days around a kind of home grown pop music recorded in Beirut and Cairo. The centre of this musical revolution at the time were singing superstars like Nancy Ajram and Haifa Wehbe, whose recordings were reaching tens of millions of young people across the Arab world (see also Marcus, 2006, on Egyptian pop singer Hakim). Some of this music is sexually suggestive, scraping abrasively against the MENA's conservative religious morality, always risking condemnatory state intervention.

The website entitled Traditional Arab Music (2011) offers an overview of Arabic music, including a brief account of the twentieth-century scene. 'Arabic pop' started to take shape during the 1950s and 1960s, a period during which popular music in the MENA was borrowing certain Western elements, as pioneered by Dalilda, an Egyptian-born singer and actress. By the 1970s, several other singers had joined the trend, and the new music had acquired recognizable features. Arabic pop is usually identifiable by its Western styled songs sung with Arabic lyrics and accompanied by Arabic instruments and lyrics. Melodies typically consist of both Eastern and Western motifs. Today, Arabic pop continues to attract a multitude of followers, even outside the MENA and particularly where its expatriates now live in large numbers.

Reggae, hip-hop, and rhythm and blues have, in the past five years or so, also begun to leave their mark on Arabic music. The second commonly involves a rapper being featured in a song (e.g., Ishtar in her song 'Habibi Sawah'). More radical, from the standpoint of Arab culture, are those artists who use rhythm and blues and reggae beats to the full, as exemplified in the music of Darine. In Baghdad hip-hop combined with Arabic music mixes Western and Islamic subjects (Arango & Ghazi, 2011). Moreover, rap songs in Arabic, spread through the various social media across Arab North Africa, have disseminated ideas and anthems in support of the Arab Spring (Fernandes, 2012). All this has provoked mixed reactions, both critical and commercial. None of these forms, however, enjoys widespread appeal. As such none is truly 'popular'.

Arabic Jazz has a following, with many groups playing typical jazz instruments in their performances. Early jazz influences began with use of the saxophone by musicians like Samir Suroor, who presents an "oriental" style. Use of the

saxophone in that manner is also evident in Abdel Halim Hafez's performances as well as, more recently, those of Kadim Al Sahir and Rida Al Abdallah. The first mainstream jazz elements entered Arab music by way of the Rahbani brothers. Ziad Rahbani, a Lebanese composer and pianist, has also advanced today's oriental jazz movement, inspiring singers like Rima Khcheich, Salma El Mosfi, and at one point, Latifa.

Rock music is popular everywhere on the planet, the Arab world being no exception. Numerous Arab bands, performing on traditional Arabic instruments, offer hard rock. Traditional Arabic Music (2011) holds that Arab rock is gaining plenty of attention in the Middle East, featuring bands such as Meen and Dabke in Lebanon, and in Jordan bands like Jadal.

Ivan Hewitt (2011) says of (European) classical music that, in much of the MENA, it is scarcely visible. He observes that:

there is a large portion of the globe where classical music barely registers. It stretches from Turkey right down the Arab peninsula, and across Iraq and Iran. Here and there in this vast area you find little pockets of activity. There are long-standing orchestras in Cairo and Beirut and Tehran, and conservatoires in Beirut and Syria. But they are delicate flowers, starved of resources, and liable to be condemned at any moment as corrupt by hard-line Muslim clerics. Even in Turkey, where Western music was encouraged by the founder of the modern secular state, there have been calls to ban Western music such as pop and classical.

In this cultural climate it should be no surprise that Arab composers of Western classical music are rather hard to find. Nonetheless, there are classical orchestras: the Syrian National Symphony Orchestra, Cairo Symphony Orchestra, Lebanese National Symphony Orchestra, Iraqi National Symphony Orchestra, Tehran Philharmonic Symphony Orchestra, and others. It follows that leisure and work in this area for Arab amateurs, professionals, buffs, and fans is available, albeit on a limited scale.

Conclusion

Garry Chick (2006) holds that every known society has leisure, even though it may not be recognized by this concept when talked about in the local language. Every society recognizes time away from obligation, be it work or non-work obligatory activity. The present article has amply demonstrated the presence of two kinds of leisure in the MENA.

Even two main constraints in Middle Eastern society have by no means fully inhibited it. The seemingly unyielding tribal oppositionalism and the organisational dominance of the Qur'an's *waqf* have certainly combined to weaken the pursuit of some kinds of serious leisure and community involvement, not to mention participation in certain types of casual and project-based leisure.² But human development in free time is still possible in the MENA, as evident in the literature and music there. Such development often occurs through activities composed of both Western and indigenous elements. Still, it sometimes occurs through activities that are much less transformed by either cultural force. That is, they are largely traditional or largely Western.

**Forthcoming in
LSA Newsletter No. 94 (March, 2013):
Robert Stebbins's
Leisure Reflections No. 32 On
'Homo Otiosus: Who Is This Creature,
Does It Exist, Should It Matter?'**

Notes

¹ For our purposes this geographic area is composed of the following countries: the Maghreb (Morocco, Western Sahara, Algeria, Mauritania, Libya, and Tunisia), the traditional Middle East, Somalia, Iran, and the Palestinian Territories. See Stebbins (2012) for more details on this classification.

² The *waqf* is a trust set up under Shariah law the goal of which it to offer particular services for all time. A *waqf*'s trustees follow an immutable set of instructions, as they go about running such institutions as schools, charities, and houses of worship.

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And now for a few words from . . . David Crouch



David Crouch, *Flirting with Space: Journeys and Creativity*, published by Ashgate 2010.

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LEISURE ATMOSPHERES: INDIVIDUALS' DOING, OUR DOING AND GENTLE POLITICS

In a recent article Kathleen Stewart expresses what she terms 'atmospheres' in and of living in terms of the cloud of influences and affects through which we find and feel our lives. Not surprisingly, leisure practices filter in and out of her narrative. Typically her writing and speech works a closely textured pattern. Typically, too, Stewart does not write detached from politics, and for her, politics emerges and merges in living as much as in apparently and sometimes very literally overarching powers external to ourselves; but they mingle.

Leisure has tended to be clarified as different from non-leisure, familiarly labelled as work, sometimes as tourism and so on. I am particularly interested in, often excited by, the relationships and fluidity through which what we do in leisure, how we feel, works for example in two particular ways, though these two ways, again, are not in mutual isolation.

These mutterings make me think of two directions in which our thinking tends to 'define' / confine, rather than explain, leisure processes and practices or activities: what we might term 'holding on' and 'going further'.

Journeys and holding on: belonging and identity

Individuals' identity can grow, positively or negatively or a mixture of both, in doing work, in working. How often the intensity or character of work and leisure mutually resemble that awful late twentieth century 'work hard, play hard'; or occur in a relationship where one balances the other; or individuals find their work the heart of their identity, belonging, self, such realisation resembling the old notion of 'happiness and home' synchronisation, 'where the heart is...'.
