ENGLISH SUMMARY

This thesis, ‘Ramadan Culture in Modern Cairo: Young Females’ Leisure Patterns and the Politics of Piety, Unity and Authenticity’, analyses shifts in affluent young women’s leisure behavior with the advent of Ramadan, and contestations surrounding those practices. It focuses on contestations pertaining to Ramadan leisure practices as points of crystallization for more crucial issues in contemporary Egyptian society. I specifically explore how piety, unity and authenticity are perceived, sought and contested in the context of leisure and in relationship to new modern conditions.

In discussing modernization, attention is directed towards critical transformations of Egypt’s socio-economic, political and spatial circumstances since late President Sadat’s Infitah or open-door policies in the early 1970s. Sadat’s policies are believed to have marked major changes in Egyptian social mores and lifestyles. His policies led to the emergence of a new mass culture in Egypt associated with the consumption of Western goods; acceleration of the rate of social mobility; and spatial modernity based on the exclusion of those less economically privileged. These changes have altered people’s consumption preferences, lifestyles and ambitions to climb the social ladder. It has also affected how they experience Ramadan nowadays. At the time that Egypt was opening its borders to the Western world and culture capitalism in full momentum, a self-conscious Islamic identity, its practices and paraphernalia were also gaining hegemony. The Islamic revival or Islamic awakening (al-Sahwa al-Islamiyya) movement began roughly sometime in the 1970s and remains popular to the present day. The general prevailing feelings among many Egyptians that the moral and spiritual foundations of their society has weakened, including Ramadan’s religious practices, is in fact a ground stone of the Islamic revival movement. These contextual modern alterations underlie the main contestations related to Ramadan practices.

In examining Ramadan leisure patterns at the present time, a number of issues come to the fore. Many of the existing Ramadan leisure activities are mentioned and recommended in the Koran and, particularly, the ahadith of the prophet Muhammed. These activities primarily include the iftar meal, sahur meal, tarawih prayers and charity work. Nevertheless, almost all of the forms and functions of these activities have become
modified and reinterpreted to fit modern life styles. In addition, some religious and
traditional meanings are experienced as ‘outdated’, and new conceptualizations of leisure
spaces or activities are invented to cope with the changing modern circumstances. For
instance, the novel *kheyam Ramadan* arose to accommodate for new consumer-driven
demands of the elites. Through the adaptation of existing leisure activities and the
invention of new ones, Ramadan traditions and religious beliefs continue to provide a
meaningful system for affluent Egyptians Muslims in contemporary times.

What has also become manifest in this research, is that Ramadan leisure culture is
a product of cultural hybridization, where global discourses blend with local religious
beliefs and traditional practices. That process of hybridization has in turn created new
cosmopolitan expressions, which young female elites assign to their Ramadan leisure
experiences.

More specifically, I have documented how Ramadan has become a highly
commercial month where the attainment and expression of piety and global consumption
go hand in hand. Piety is embedded in, and shaped by global consumerist discourses,
which, in turn, are adapted to match the desire for piety. Dominant Islamist voices oppose
the blending of religious and consumerist values, and argue that it weakens the religious
character of Ramadan practices and undermines their core values. Nonetheless, for the
young affluent women, consumption has become an important self-technique to construct
and experience a religious self. This is particularly apparent in their high consumption of
Islamic commodities during the fasting month.

The sacralization of everyday life allows religion to emerge in public spaces that
were previously marked as secular. The popularity of Islamic products, spread of
television, the internet and other technological mediums have supported the spread of
religious ideas and symbols in the public sphere. Moreover, during the holy month many
profane products’ packing, advertising campaigns and public leisure venues are modified
to accommodate religious motifs, Ramadan culture icons and thus appeal more to the
Muslim target market.

Furthermore, it becomes evident that the notion of *umma* (unity and social
cohesion) is becoming redefined within the changing modern context of capitalism, social
mobility, and city-structure. Generally, consumption has facilitated the acceleration of
the pace of life and has enhanced individualization within families. Another implication of the prevalence of consumerism is that young people are more reluctant in spending much time in charity work. They prefer to invest their free time in activities that solely focus on personal and career growth. On the contrary, the collective, religious and charitable nature of the holy month slows the pace of life and encourages social cohesion. During Ramadan, youngsters engage more in family leisure activities, mingle with the local community and invest more time in philanthropic projects. The relatively new trend of Islamic social philanthropy, that encourages long-term sustainable development, simultaneously empowers unprivileged communities as well as the affluent volunteers. Through engagement in this particular type of charity, young volunteers develop their business and social skills while realizing the religious virtue of charity that is highly recommended for Ramadan.

The collective nature of Ramadan leisure may, particularly, serve as a source of empowerment for women. Women’s increased access to the public leisure sphere during the holy month introduces them to new sets of knowledge, allows them to form solidarities and to resist some social constraints. On another level, the commercialization of many Ramadan leisure activities and spatial modernity of Cairo leads to the exclusion of low-income groups. The high rate of social mobility in the last few decades predominantly explains intense feelings of frustrations of the poor, for their inability to access many Ramadan-related commodities and public leisure spaces.

The quest for authenticity becomes particularly intense during the fasting month. Ramadan is the time for people to re-enchant their world, through reviving what they perceive as original forms of their religious and cultural heritage. People’s nostalgia for the ‘glorious’ past Islamic civilizations triggers the aesthetication of local traditions. During the holy month, affluent women appropriate products that are usually associated with the poor and rural population. In the process, such low-culture products are transformed in order to be able to stand for new positive and aesthetic values, and appeal to the wealthy social classes. These traditional items are re-modeled to match global fashion tastes, hygiene and health preferences, and finally, people’s rushed lifestyles. Another modernist trend is based on economic development and social progress. The nation-state and its subsidiaries intensely promote during Ramadan an image of the
authentic Egyptian-Muslim citizen who is economically progressive, and yet remains committed to local traditions and religious values. The government also imposes various policies during the holy month to combat political activities of extremist Islamist groups and preserve the modern image of the city.

The results of this research point to the cultural politics surrounding Ramadan leisure practices in contemporary Cairo. It examines the contested roles and understandings for the definition of religion, authentic traditions, gender roles and social justice. These contestations are grounded in power relations. Power dominators such as commercial companies, local customs, nation-state’s authorities and its Islamic critics contest how public leisure spaces should be organized, which social groups are entitled to access these spaces, and how people should behave within these venues. During Ramadan, these various parties attempt to delimit a set of proper social performances to promote their own aims. Amongst other things, they prescribe how the ‘ideal’ Egyptian Muslim women citizen/consumer should dress, behave and consume in public leisure spaces. My discussion of young elite women’s leisure patterns during Ramadan illustrates that power is not unilateral and that people negotiate their power positions as they resist dominant discourses. It becomes evident that the communal leisure context of Ramadan serves as an ideal site for collective resistance and empowerment for underprivileged social groups.