Ramadan culture in modern Cairo
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‘Tips for Ramadan’ was the title of a satirical article addressing Egyptian youth in a popular teenage Arabic lifestyle magazine named *Ehna* or *Us* (October 2006). The article was written by two young Egyptian women (Mena Taher and Alya Taher) who, in a comic way, provided a series of Ramadan advices to young Egyptian students, employees and business entrepreneurs, to help resolve various kinds of challenges during the holy month. The writers introduced their topic by stating that Ramadan is the month during which Egyptian Muslims, mainly referring to youth, should make some necessary changes in their lives. Based on that, the authors offered some recommendations that will enable Muslims to benefit the most from the holy month (Taher and Taher, 2006: 7).

Below are the tips provided by which I offer a literal translation (for detailed clarification of each tip, please see Appendix)

1- This is your chance to get late to work as your manager will not, in the first place, be focused on the time you arrived, that is even if he (manager, ns) arrives before you!

2- As for school and university students, your days are short and if your teachers mention examinations or homework, tell them: ‘Sir, we are in Ramadan, and this is the spiritual month and so we are invited for *iftar* and plan to go out for *sahur* every day’.

3- Try to avoid taxis and microbuses to insure you return home safely, looking civilized among your families.

4- Beware of smokers, as they become very nervous and aggressive just like Cairo streets before *iftar* time.

5- Quickly memorize your family tree before Ramadan starts as family invitations (*iftar* and *sahur*, ns) include familiar members and those you’ve never seen in your life, so that when *Tant* (title Egyptians use when they address an older person whether they are related or not, ns) Fifi asks you about your school or university or work, you would answer and ask her about her daughter that has been engaged for a month and her son who is struggling in his *Thannawiya Amma* (Egyptian Higher Education degree).

6- After first day of *iftar* with the family make sure you watch all the soap operas so that you know which ones are the most popular and thus you won’t look ignorant in front of your friends while they are discussing Ramadan soap operas. And don’t you dare watch an American show like ‘Friends’, but rather watch the Egyptian ones like ‘Hussein at the corner’ and candidate camera.

7- Try to enjoy and get all your energy out at all the new *kheyam Ramadan* and the trendy-popular places in the beginning of Ramadan, so that by the end of the month you can put all your focus on prayers and worship.
8- And for those who own businesses, this is your opportunity to advertise on Egyptian channels that no one watches except in Ramadan. Try to also include female models that dance and sing on catching music melody that would attract the audience.

9- And for those who own pubs, instead of losing money during Ramadan, transform your venues into a Ramadan ambience with water-pipes and all, and with discretion you can try serving liquor in tea cups!

10- Special advice to the girls: Minimize your intake of konafa and basbusa so that in the Feast (Eid) you can wear bikinis and mini-skirts in Sharm el-Sheikh.

The article above plays upon some underlying key themes in the Ramadan leisure context. Primarily, they are commercialism (advice 7, 8, 9), Westernization (advice 10), rational authenticity (advice 3), aesthetic authenticity (advice 6), family unity (advice 2, 5) and, overall, social expectations on piety attainment and expression. These dominant practices and views on these themes can certainly be constraining, in terms of directing or limiting people’s leisure behavior. Yet at the same time, dominant social expectations can be enabling by being either re-affirmed or challenged through human leisure behavior. One can thus argue that the Ramadan leisure culture of modern Cairo is shaped by the interplay between social context and the practices of individuals within leisure spaces.

In this book, I have documented how during the liminal month of Ramadan prevailing social expectations shift to promote moral training, family unity, commercialism, economic development and other attributes presented earlier. Also, social norms that govern gender and social classes’ access to leisure resources (particularly public space) are subject to temporary shifts throughout the sacred month. In yearn to lead more religious and traditional lifestyles during Ramadan, young Muslim women accommodate to and contest those social discourses in a manner that fulfills those quests. By focusing on young women’s leisure patterns in Ramadan, it became clear how this social group actively negotiates meanings of gender, piety, social cohesion and authenticity within the modern context they dwell in.

An argument that runs throughout the book is that young women’s leisure is a product of cultural hybridization, where global discourses blend with local religious beliefs and traditional practices. That process of hybridization or transculturation has in turn created new cosmopolitan expressions, which young female elites assign to their Ramadan leisure experiences.
In particular, I have examined various forms of contestations that accompany the
dynamic changes that Ramadan rituals undergo. A number of these debates are
referenced to in the *Ehna* article. Some key issues are the potential for profane recreation
facilities to distract one from attending to religious and work duties (advices 6, 7),
criticisms towards those commercial advertisements that resort to sexual images (advice
8) and the overall commodification of the holy month. In relation to commodification, the
issue of *niya* is highlighted. Some people make use of the holy month to fulfil material
ambitions (advices 8, 9) in addition to achieving higher states of piety. Those who misuse
Ramadan as a justification for their lack of work efficiency are also disapproved of
(advices 1, 2). In a satirical tone, the writers mock those who abide to moral norms during
the holy month or fasting hours, only to revert back to their mundane or sinful acts soon
afterwards (advice 7, 10). Advices three and four in the article can be interpreted as
oppositional remarks towards those who fail to live up to the authentic/progressive
ambitions of the nation-state. Such practices are specifically criticized for being
‘aggressive’, ‘uncivilized’ and, accordingly, defy ‘true’ Islamic values and obstruct the
nation’s development.

In this final chapter of this book I will elaborate on a number of key themes that were
tackled throughout this book. I primarily argue that the (1) Contemporary Ramadan
leisure culture is hybrid (2) Cosmopolitanism appeals to the young upper-middle class
women and fulfils the nation-state modernist ambitions (3) Some ideas of what it means
to be an ‘authentic’ Egyptian, Muslim and woman are surrounded with ambivalences (4)
Power dominators such as the nation-state and commercial companies exercise control
over public leisure practices and spaces, nevertheless, they are contested by youth. These
dynamics of identity formation, culture representations and shifts in power relations are
particularly brought to the fore within Ramadan leisure spaces. The temporal structure of
moral norms, social boundaries and power struggles that go with these transformations
makes the holy month a particularly unique time to examine cultural politics in
contemporary Cairo. By cultural politics I mean the different understandings of and
control over piety, authenticity and society on the level of Ramadan leisure practices.
1. **Hybridization**

Numerous examples of leisure practices discussed in previous chapters point to the hybridization of existing Ramadan leisure patterns. This process has been greatly facilitated in the last few decades since Sadat’s *Infitah* policies. As I have argued, the economic openess and orientation to the outside world greatly redefined and stimulated Egypt’s modernization and, consequently, modernization of local religious and traditional practices. More specifically, I focused on the impact of the nation-state’s modernist project that situates local religious values and traditions as compatible with economic development; expansion of knowledge and technology through improved telecommunication and media connections; increased exposure to Western capitalism and culture; and acceleration of the rate of social mobility. Evidence of modernity is also apparent in the city’s urban planning policies that are redrawn along modernist lines informed by efficiency, discipline and rationality of land use. These socio-economic and spatial transformations have allowed for the modification, reinterpretation and invention of Ramadan leisure practices to fit with modern living.²⁷³

Some of the holy month’s rituals were transformed in a manner that matches the nation-state’s ambitions for economic progress, existing social class hierarchies and spatial structure of contemporary urban Cairo. In addition, people’s desire to lead an ‘authentic lifestyle’ during Ramadan has lead to the adaption of Western influences/habits and modern standards to ‘genuine’ Ramadan practices. The resulting trend of hybridization fulfils the upper-middle classes’ quest for ‘authentic’ forms of religiosity and the upholding of local traditions during the holy month, without necessary giving up their modern consumption preferences.

At times, specific religious meanings may be experienced as ‘outdated’, and new conceptualizations of leisure spaces or activities may be invented to cope with the changing modern circumstances.²⁷⁴ For instance, the novel *kheyam Ramadan* arose to...

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²⁷³ In this perspective, my research supports those studies that demonstrate that rituals, ritual artefacts and ritual meanings are subject to transformations (Goodwin, Smith and Spiggle 1990; Otnes, Kim and Lowrey 1992), and that rituals are influenced by and influence social and cultural contexts (Otnes and Scott, 1996).

²⁷⁴ For an interesting insight on how new rituals can arise as a result of modernization, see Kreinath et al (2004).
accommodate for the new consumer-modern demands of the elites. At these venues *sahur* meals are offered and they frequently include live-music, sales promotions activities and, more recently, computer games. Through such adaption of existing activities and the invention of new ones, Ramadan’s traditions and religious beliefs continue to provide a meaningful system for affluent Egyptian Muslims in contemporary times.

Overall, it became apparent that modernization influences the hybridization of Ramadan leisure culture in a number of ways. Due to upper-middle classes’ desire for authentic traditions during the holy month, once can observe the revitalization of certain local practices that are often disregarded during other times of the year. This in turn results in the transformation and reinterpretation of disappearing traditions, particularly among the affluent classes, through preferred consumption practices. Leisure practices that in their popular forms are frequently rejected by the elites, as they are associated with the poor, are restyled in Ramadan to match upper-middle classes’ demands for quality and sophistication. These consumption practices are upgraded by removing elements that have negative associations and may endanger their marketable assets. Instead, focus is directed on their glorious past and aesthetic qualities. Through this kind of consumption, upgraded local traditions are sustained among the elite classes and particularly emphasized in Ramadan. The ‘authentic’ nature of the holy month that celebrates national identity, perceived as detached from Western influences, facilitates that revitalization process.

However, it is vital to emphasize that particular local Ramadan traditions and artifacts are revitalized in a manner that are attuned to modern, sometimes Western discourses. An example to demonstrate this point concerns Egyptian Muslim females’ fashion trends, particularly evident during the holy month. Since the young women strive to be as slim and athletic as the contemporary American and Arab pop singers they view over the internet and television, some textile manufactures have created a *gallabiya* style that is tight, acts like a corset and defines the body figure. These trendy *gallabiyas* thus combine modesty, local traditions and up-to-date fashion tastes.

Concurrently, it is crucial to stress that while modernity demands that religious rituals undergo modification, this process does not invariably involve major altered forms of these rituals; in order that religious symbolic meanings may still be upheld. For
example, in recent years arose the phenomenon of the mobile or *mutaharrika mawa'id al-Rahman*, an adaption of the original stable ones. Due to the growing population size of Cairo’s inhabitants, high traffic congestion of the city during peak hours, particularly during *iftar* time, the mobile *mawa'id al-Rahman* were introduced. These forms of banquets of the Merciful are highly convenient to those stuck in Cairo traffic and unable to reach home on time to break fast. Contrary to the claims of some that religious values have been lost as Egyptian society changes, the modification of the *mawa'id* practice does not undermine religiosity, but rather enhances the core virtue of charity.

In addition, some Western practices and discourses now inform a number of new Ramadan leisure practices. Such foreign practices gets reinterpreted in the imported cultural context and are experienced through a combination of Western and local traditions. The new trend of the *gallabiyya sahum* party held frequently in Ramadan is a case in point. At these parties, people dress-up in fashionable high-expense *gallabiyyas*, eat clean and low-fat popular food commodities, socialize and listen to classical Arabic music. This idea of ‘dressing up’ to celebrate a festive occasion like Ramadan is inspired by the Halloween celebration mainly practiced in Western countries. For the participants the *gallabiya* party celebrates ‘authentic’ Egyptian culture similar to a foreign festivity that they are keen to celebrate every year. The same approach applies to the new trend of the ‘romantic *fanus*’ that lovers exchange at the start of Ramadan. This trend is copied from Valentine celebration where couples express their love by exchanging flowers and chocolates.

Kimura and Belk (2005, 325 ) have argued for Japan how the introduction of Western holidays like Valentine’s Day and Halloween, which have complex cultural ideologies behind them, ‘threaten to displace traditional local holidays’. In the context of Cairo and Ramadan, I have demonstrated that Western traditions do not necessarily replace local ones. They may rather modify or revive local traditions in a fashion that is attuned to people’s modern lifestyles. What we observe is thus not an instance of sheer cultural imperialism or Americanization where Western cultural practices erase local ones under the disguise of globalization, as theorized by Kimura and Belk (2005) and in Ritzer’s McDonaldization thesis (1998).
Instead, Ramadan has become a hybrid month where the ‘traffic in things’ (Jackson, 1998) has led to glocommodification (Ram, 2004:27). Ramadan is certainly a ‘glocommodified’ ritual that combines a variety of symbols connoting religious values and beliefs, as well as markers of global consumption ethos. ‘Traffic’ in this instance refers to commoditization in which various local and global agents encourage the revival and transformation of ritual meanings. Local agents include the nation-state’s authorities that exercise their power in how religious and national identities are represented within the public sphere. Similar to American holidays as argued by Schmidt (1991) Ramadan leisure traditions are also edited in accordance with the needs of the profit-oriented industries. Moreover, I argue that the affluent Egyptian Muslim youth are an important consumer market that influences the production/representations of Ramadan-related commodities and services available in the market. This social group has a high purchasing power and, accordingly, through their consumption choices have the ability to define the reproduction of the Ramadan-leisure culture forms. The preferred Ramadan culture that best matches this social group’s preferences is cosmopolitan.

2. **Cosmopolitanism**

Against ‘globalization’, a term implying the free movement of capital and the global (mainly Western) spread of ideas and practices, cosmopolitanism is a word used by the new cosmopolitans to emphasize empathy, toleration and respect for other cultures and values (Werbner, 2008). Thus, cosmopolitanism is about reaching out across cultural differences through dialogue, aesthetic enjoyment and respect. A cosmopolitan lifestyle tends to be associated with the Westernized intellectual elite who are able to travel, acquire a good education and, hence, the chances of achieving a cosmopolitan attitude (Meijer, 1999). In this book I examined cosmopolitanism as a situated phenomenon within the specific time frame of Ramadan, spatial setting of urban Cairo and among the upper-middle class youth.

Cosmopolitanism highly appeals to the young affluent Egyptian females. This category of women define themselves as becoming modern, in contrast to what they perceive as backward features of their culture, but they simultaneously embrace tradition
against corrupting modern influences. In their view, their religion encourages both spiritual and material progress that benefits oneself, one’s community and the nation. They also interpret their religion as one of tolerance that encourages cultural exchange and intellectual advancements. Cosmopolitanism thus attracts this category of young women, who redefine ‘Muslimness’ or religiosity and local traditions in such a manner that these do not clash with consumer practices, high-tech technologies and global ideologies to which they have grown accustomed to.

A cosmopolitan attitude was mainly expressed through young women’s consumption of expensive and folklorized Islamic/traditional commodities and the use of leisure facilities. More importantly, these consumption preferences portray the young women as high-class, educated and high-cultured individuals. They are able to embrace and enjoy aesthetic local traditions, attain and express piety in a trendy manner and, simultaneously, appear progressively modern. As argued earlier, the young affluent women prefer to consume those leisure culture forms that have been folklorized or cleansed from negative non-progressive qualities such as superstition and ignorance.

The consumption of cosmopolitan leisure forms is mainly restricted to the affluent classes and excludes those from economically marginalized backgrounds. As I have presented in chapter six, almost all of the Ramadan leisure commodities and facilities accessed by the rich are expensive and, therefore, unaffordable to the poor. Hence, in contrast to the conceptualization of festival celebration as being available to anyone who wishes to attend (Procter, 2004), Ramadan festivities may in some occasions reproduce social inequalities.

What is more, cosmopolitanism frames Islam and local Egyptian culture as universal, open and multi-faceted. In line with Azra (2002) and van Wichelen (2007), I argue that by becoming more cosmopolitan, Islam could loose its negative connotations with rural lifestyles and backwardness. Particularly in examining the commercial culture that Ramadan has become deeply immersed in, Islam as a worldly religion comes to the fore. As demonstrated in this book, almost all Ramadan-related commodities and leisure spaces accommodate modern considerations such as hygiene, convenience and healthy lifestyles.
This trend of Islamic-cosmopolitanism realizes the nation-state’s modernization endeavors. As noted previously, the Egyptian nation-state wishes to propagate the image of Islam as a tolerant religion that encourages economic progress and is compatible with modernist attributes informed by efficiency, discipline and rationality. At the same time, through various media representations and symbolic actions in Ramadan, it strives to propagate the notion that the nation-state honors local traditions and religious practices. In that sense, the consumption of cosmopolitan Islamic-traditional commodities matches the aims of the modernist project of Egypt to unite economic progress and local authenticity. These profitable types of Ramadan leisure forms help people realize piety, sustain local traditions and, finally, present a positive image of Islam. It therefore comes as no surprise that the Egyptian government and its subsidiaries have forged close ties with commercial companies that produce cosmopolitan Islamic-traditional commodities and recreation facilities.

In contradiction to postmodernist theories that indicate an erosion of the state’s ability to create national and religious identities (cf. Firat and Dholakia, 2003), the findings of this research reveals otherwise. The nation-state becomes a primary agent in defining Ramadan leisure practices and propagating a progressive ‘authentic’ identity. However, that identity is imbued with ambivalences.

3. Ambivalences

Modern cultural discourses play a key role in how youth identify themselves and in the meanings they associate to their Ramadan leisure practices. What it means to be a woman, Muslim, Egyptian and upper-class is shaped by existing dominant gender expectations, commercial culture, social hierarchies and the political context youth interact with. Typically an individual embraces one discourse as expressing his or her true or authentic self and elaborates it more fully than the others. Alternative discourses often appear fashioned as reversals or inversions of the ‘true authentic’ one. However, there were numerous instances in this research when respondents demonstrated conflicting value orientations.

Similar to what Newcomb (2009) conceptualized in the context of Morocco, the role of the Egyptian woman may sometimes appear ambivalent. Egyptian women
confront an awkward dichotomy between their role as citizens in the nation-state (*watan*) and as members of the Muslim community (*umma*). She is expected to be the protector of Egyptian cultural values within the home domain and, at the same time, the advocate of modernity within the public sphere. Upper-class female youth tend to resolve this kind of contradictory expectations, through explaining their commitment to progress and leisure as divinely ordained.

Affluent female informants justified their high access to the public sphere, for example, in terms of charity and prayers purposes. They also stated that women’s engagement in public life is advised in Islamic teachings. My interviewees provided examples of prominent female Islamic figures who were active in trade, war and the public sphere. As for profane leisure, they affirmed that those kinds of recreation activities that are healthy for the mind and body, such as sporting, are encouraged by God. These approaches allow them to reconcile their perceived ‘authentic religious identity’ with progressive notions of modernity. Yet when faced with those negative features of modernity, such as individualization and moral looseness, they embrace their Arab-Islamic traditions that celebrate unity and modesty.

How authenticity is defined in relation to social class is also surrounded with uncertainties. The ‘authentic’ Egyptian is presented in the media as one who retains the values of *ibn el-balad* (chivalry, honesty, integrity, loyalty, family unity) that are de-associated from capitalistic values such as materialism, consumerism, competitiveness and individualism. Simultaneously, the ideal Egyptian is expected to uphold competitive skills, exploit new opportunities and other capitalistic values compatible to a rapidly changing society. Social expectations dictate that young Muslims remain family-oriented, unselfish, and at the same time, compete successfully with fellow citizens to climb the social ladder.

Young Egyptian women’s attitudes towards the West are equally mixed. They hold the West responsible for spreading Islamophobia in the world and endorsing ‘blasphemous’ statements or images against core Islamic traditions/icons. Yet, they identify values such as human rights, democracy and freedom as key Western principles, which they greatly appreciate and express disappointment for not enjoying these values,
to some degree, in their home country.\textsuperscript{275} It can be theorized that the young Egyptian Muslims appreciate freedom of speech to a large degree as long as it does not tarnish sacred religious figures and traditions.

The same kind of ambivalences applies to consumerism and its relationship to religion. While consumerism goes hand in hand with the commodification and folklorization of religious motifs and traditional practices, it also contributes to their sustenance. This is mainly realized through circulating religious commodities and symbols in the public leisure sphere. As a matter of fact, religious consumption for many young people in Cairo is a way of displaying and experiencing a religious self.

Lastly, I wish to emphasize that when youth are faced with contradictory values they tend to sway from one to the other according to the social context. For example, in one instance a female respondent condemned the traditional man’s ignorance and approved of modernity for its facilitation of progress and technology; and in another occasion she described the traditional world of her grandfathers as one of physical strength and noble values and criticized the ‘Westernized girls’ for their moral looseness. In that sense, it is important to note that identity or self consists of a set of different ‘self-schemata’ as proposed by Gregg (1998) and also contrasting and often-contradictory values.

4. Power Relations, Resistance and Empowerment

This study investigated the power struggles that political, economic, ideological or cultural agents exert over public Ramadan leisure spaces and women’s bodily dispositions. As Asad (2003:184) notes, the public sphere is articulated by power relations that disseminate ideological representations and, I argue further, to a large extent regulate access to leisure domains and terms of engagement within those spaces. Key power dominators that inform Ramadan leisure domains and women’s habitus are the commercial companies, local customs, nation-state’s authorities and its Islamic critics. These various factions manipulate the image of women to promote their own

\textsuperscript{275} The West is highly appreciated throughout the Arab and wider Muslim world. Recent opinion polls have shown that the majority of respondents from Morocco to Indonesia also value human rights, prefer democracy to dictatorship, and favor freedom over repression (Tessler and Gao, 2005).
aims, prescribing how their ‘ideal’ Egyptian Muslim women citizen/consumer should act in public. Each of these parties attempt to delimit a set of proper social performances in Ramadan: appropriate religious observances, expressions of local culture forms and values, and suitable leisure spaces and commodities for various social groups (gender, social class and age).

Commercial companies and retailers profit tremendously from the commercialization of Ramadan and commodification of the holy month’s motifs. Through strategic marketing initiatives and the provision of special sacralized commodities during Ramadan, many commercial outlets gain much income during that month. The same economic logic explains further why local municipalities have supported the commercialization of the holy month and transformation of heritage sites (al-Husayn area) into commercial markets.

Nonetheless, I propose that profitability is not the only incentive for the commercialization of Ramadan, or more specifically, religious/traditional commodities and recreation spaces. As Kopytoff (1986) argues the commoditization of holidays is significantly related to the cultural and ideological premises that suffuse its working. In other words, the types of Ramadan-related products and services available in the market encompass and disseminate important socio-cultural and religious ideologies. I have previously stated that the nation-state endorses the production of cosmopolitan religious/traditional commodities and services, as this supports its modern ambitions of framing the country’s traditions and major religion (Islam) as universal. The same nationalist stance characterizes the Egyptian female citizen as simultaneously modern, secular and Islamic. One would expect government institutions to assist those commercial providers that manufacture commodities and offer services that are aligned with its modernist project.

At the same time, there are Islamist-political groups that frame the nationalist vision as hopelessly enslaved to Western secularism. Instead, they suggest that the Egyptian woman needs to return to an authentic, traditional Muslim identity, modeled after the imagined example of the Prophet. Therefore, besides resorting to circulating leaflets at mosques during tarawih hours, funding/organizing Ramadan charity activities, Islamist groups also produce Islamic commodities to disseminate their fundamentalists’
ideologies. Hence, for further research I propose an investigation on the identities of those manufacturers (local or foreign ones) that produce Islamic-traditional products and the Egyptian government’s stance towards those entrepreneurs.

My discussion of the Ramadan leisure patterns illustrates that power is not unilateral and that people negotiate their power positions as they resist dominant discourses. Resistance builds on catching the elusive moment when it is possible to realize individual preferences, when individuals can challenge the rigid organization of place and turn it into a space for defiance (cf. de Certeau, 1984: xiv). The issue of leisure as resistance particularly places emphasis on personal empowerment and opportunities to challenge the constraints and difficulties that individuals face in their everyday lives. Certainly the women in this research frequently resisted and contested competing dominant discourses and turned them to their own leisure fulfillments.

Building on Faucault’s (1983) ideas, structuralist theorists argue that resistance is not just about ways to gain individual or personal empowerment, but also about collective or group challenges to dominant orthodoxies or ideologies (Ramazanoghu, 1993). While individual resistance may enhance personal power, collective resistance is more clearly linked to social activism. It challenges dominant societal views related to issues such as gender and social class inequalities. The notion of resistance directs attention to the potential role of leisure as an instigator and catalyst for broader social action and social change, including the potential to move towards a more equitable society (Shaw, 2005).

More specifically, it became apparent that because of its communal nature, Ramadan leisure activities serve as ideal sites for collective resistance and empowerment. The holy month grants many opportunities for social groups to collectively voice their opinions, and challenge the constraints that they face in their everyday lives. This explains, for instance, why the government imposes special laws during Ramadan that restrict people gathering for long at some mosques, as illustrated in chapter seven.
During the holy month, several contextual factors facilitate women’s leisure access to the public sphere and enhance their leisure experiences. In Ramadan sexual harassment and crime rates are relatively low which highly promotes women’s access to public space. Also, Muslim women are encouraged to engage in public leisure activities more extensively during the holy month to realize religious and philanthropic duties. These observations support Wearing’s (1992) argument that the contextual nature may permit or constrain one’s ability to challenge social norms.

Following this line of argument, the contextual nature of Ramadan serves as a crucial time for women’s empowerment. Many Ramadan public leisure spaces serve as potential venues for women participants to resist restrictive gender discourses. Women’s increased access to the mosque for tarawih, religious classes and the public sphere, in general, allows them to expand their knowledge and form solidarities. Through these leisure patterns, young upper-middle class women challenge the dominant social expectation that women should remain within the private sphere. Instead, they claim that Islamic teachings encourage women to engage actively in the public sphere for education, employment and charity purposes. Young affluent women use the emancipating nature of the holy month, perceived as the ‘ideal’ Muslim lifestyle, to support their argument. They claim that all other months of the year should be as ‘liberating’ in the same way as the holy month. Women’s continuous access to the public sphere, particularly during the holy month, and their insistence on positive change may eventually transform the socio-cultural discourses that constrain their mobility. Through their active social actions throughout the sacred month, they may well prove to re-write the script of the ‘ideal authentic’ Muslim women.

In addition, within collective leisure activities women are temporarily free to express themselves and take part in group discussions. As presented in chapter six, at the Ramadan leisure spaces women participants engage in interactive negotiations, that may eventually, create new meanings associated with broader cultural discourses. Through discussions, women reach new understandings of social expectations and responsibilities.

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276 Several research studies have shown that women’s resistance through non-traditional leisure choices is clearly facilitated by certain environmental, situational, or interactional conditions that, for example, include support for and awareness of such opportunities (Auster, 2001).
in relation to motherhood, femininity and religiosity. For the young affluent women, an ‘ideal’ Egyptian Muslim female is expected to strive to not only be a ‘good’ mother and wife. She is also responsible to excel in her education, career, adopt a cosmopolitan attitude and uphold religious/local traditions.

What is particularly unique about Ramadan is the noticeable increase of religious and charitable activities that bring people from various socio-economic backgrounds together. For instance, at the mawa'id al-Rahman the affluent young volunteers and unprivileged people get to mingle together and, possibly, negotiate new meanings for socio-cultural and religious issues. The cumulative effects of interactive negotiation among women may erode or change those restrictive dominant ideologies, by creating new identities for those leisure participants.

It is also vital to note that the young women were principally able to actively challenge dominant discourses only within female designated leisure spheres. This applies to their leisure participation at the women-only parts of the mosque during tarawih prayers and religious classes. It also pertains to their leisure activities throughout the year such as at women-only cafes and beaches. As Wearing (1999: 47) affirms ‘women-only groups can experience themselves and their abilities better, while in mixed friendship groups men may have a tendency to take over’. Many of the attributes that have been linked to leisure such as self-expression, self-determination and flow come about when the self has been comfortably situated and hegemonic expectations are no long problematic (Samdahl et al, 1998) which I argue are more likely to occur at female designated leisure spaces. Female respondents re-affirmed this point by stating that they felt more ‘free’ when no males are present, as they did not have to mind their behavior or dress-style. They added that in women-only gatherings they can do or say whatever they wish without feeling guilty for breaking any traditional or religious codes of modesty. In the company of other women, females are more likely to experience themselves, their abilities and experience a sense of solidarity.

Moreover, one can argue that the noticeable increase of women-only leisure spaces in the last decade includes simultaneous reproductive (the opposite of resistance,
when dominant power relations are reinforced) and resistant processes.\textsuperscript{277} Women’s participation in female-only leisure venues can re-affirm the view that gender segregation is mandatory within public leisure spaces. Yet as argued earlier, these leisure settings are ideal for Muslim women to express themselves freely, acquire new knowledge and, in the process, resist gender inequalities through interactive negotiations.

I argue further that social position determines the socio-cultural discourses imposed and the resources granted that may be utilized to overcome restrictive discourses. Extensive research was carried out to show how one’s social position determines his/her ability to negotiate constraints.\textsuperscript{278} These research studies conclude that the process of negotiation is embedded in inequalities in the wider social contexts that may compromise these negotiations. Some of those inequalities are an outcome of gender and social class differences. Thus individuals differ in terms of the social rules imposed on them and the resources they are granted to overcome these constraints. As discussed in chapter seven, the case of Rania clearly reveals that in Boulaq area women are subject to restrictive gender norms that limit their mobility in the public sphere. These norms greatly contrast to the relative freedom enjoyed by men in Boulaq and upper-middle class women residing in affluent parts of Cairo. In terms of resources, it was clear that the affluent classes have higher access to resources, mainly financial and technological mediums, to voice their opinion and resist social constraints.

The upper-classes also have the required resources to help economically marginalized groups in society. In chapter five, I argued that the new trend of youths’ Ramadan philanthropy, which is grounded in sustainable development, is to empower the lower social classes. This trend, that is particularly intensified in Ramadan and extends to other months of the year, challenges the existing social hierarchy. Through education and skill development programs that Muslim youth organizations hold today, lower classes

\textsuperscript{277} A number of studies have reinforced the idea that reproductive and resistant processes can occur simultaneously. See, Guthrie and Castelnuovo (1992); and Theberge (2000).

\textsuperscript{278} Reference to Anthony Gidden’s writing on the ‘transformation of intimacy’ he brings together the emphasis on pursuit of ‘self’ as a central feature of intimate relationships with recognition of the role of intra-couple negotiations in achieving this (Kay, 2003). His analysis recognizes the significance of social context conditions as possible barriers to successfully doing so (Kay, 2003). The ‘Gender Construction theory’ is also closely related to Gidden’s as it acknowledges the linkage between pursuit of self, intra-couple negotiations and social context (Kay, 2003).
will be better equipped to climb the social ladder and lead the country into development. Again, the contextual ‘authentic’ nature of the holy month motivates this approach to development.

For the young affluent women, Ramadan is the time for people to realize ‘true Islamic authenticity’ which is perceived as taking part in development initiatives that have long-term personal and social percussions. These comprise of leisure activities that accelerate personal development on a variety of levels primarily, spiritual, aesthetic, career and social skills. In addition, it pertains to leisure activities such as philanthropy that enhance the quality of life for poor communities and supports their country’s economic development. For many of the young upper-class Muslim women, this is the ‘true authentic’ spirit of Ramadan.

The analysis of Ramadan leisure practices reveals key cultural politics and dynamics in contemporary Egyptian society. It brings to the fore how piety, unity and authenticity are perceived, sought and contested in relationship to new modern conditions. The prevalence of the market culture, acceleration of the rate of social mobility, spatial modernity of the city, Westernization, modern technology, nation-state ambitions for economic development and outcomes of the Islamic Revival movement have all influenced Ramadan culture nowadays. These contextual modern alterations have led to the modification and reinterpretation of existing Ramadan leisure practices. Also, new practices were invented that fit with modern living. It also became evident that various social groups (gender, social classes and generation) experience and respond to these modern changes differently. People attain Ramadan-related leisure fulfillments (piety, social cohesion and authenticity) through accommodating, contesting and/or resisting dominant social expectations. The collective, religious and festive nature of Ramadan leisure practices particularly serves as an ideal site for collective resistance and empowerment for underprivileged social groups.