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The Director's Column

An Arab Henna Night United Milwaukee Communities:

Arab and Muslim women display the finest cultural dress they possess when attending special celebrations such as henna nights, weddings, and other group and community gatherings. The significance of attending these celebrations wearing cultural dress surpasses its aesthetic meaning and reflects more on the deep connections that women establish with such an attire.

Each dress worn in these special occasions tells a unique story. This story often begins back in the home country, where the dress was made and then shipped or brought by the wearer to the new home. In other cases, the dress was found here in America, where the wearer was searching for a very special

item in an ethnic clothing store. The dress also tells us how one establishes connections with her land and ancestry by deciding on the color, fabric, thread, and design of what she wears. These dresses tell us stories of mothers passing on precious clothing items to their daughters, or grandmothers making dresses for their granddaughters. Or, alternatively, they give us glimpses of young women who ask other community members to help them find and purchase cultural dresses close to their personal tastes. Young women usually alter their cultural dress to adjust it to current taste and fashion, while at the same time preserving the "original and classic" basic homeland design. These new fashionable varieties do not reduce the cultural value of the dress, but rather add to its ethnic makeup. Masterful additions are what make Arab and Muslim women's cultural dresses vibrant and relevant and prevent them from becoming static, old, and useless. For a woman who is born in an Arab culture, the story of the dress can best be told on a henna day celebration, when most of the women from the community wear their cultural dress. During events such as these, they often ask each other: "I like your dress, is it from here or from le'blaad (the homeland)?" In order to display the social and cultural significance of the Henna day as a major celebration of women's cultural



Henna Night Photos
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clothing, AMWRRRI organized a Henna Night at Marquette University in cooperation with the Office of International Education. The event was also partly sponsored by a grant from Wisconsin Humanities Council, WHC.

Henna Day and the night celebration "sahra" that precedes the wedding day are the most authentic celebrations that remain very close to the tradition and heritage of Bilad al-Sham's region, especially in countries such as Palestine and Jordan. Among other customs and traditions that transmit Arab culture and heritage, immigrants brought with them the Henna Night. The cultural dress, food, music, folk songs and dance, and henna applications on the hands of the bride "al-`arros" and the groom "al-arees," are only some aspects of Henna Day celebrations. Wedding ceremonies speak of the long-standing social and cultural traditions in Arab and Muslim societies that are still alive and practiced with some variation among Arab and Muslim communities.

The bride and the groom for this spectacular Henna Wedding day were two Marquette University students, Alexander Fabrizio, a senior in the College of Arts and Science, and his fiancé Rochelle Christensen. The event was very successful and well-attended. Everyone enjoyed the program, from the moment that they arrived and were seated in a cultural atmosphere listening to the Arabic folk music and songs, until the end of the ceremony, when attendees took pictures with the bride and the groom who were sitting on seats called the "looge" that were placed inside a traditional tent that was assembled inside the hall.

The bride wore a long Palestinian dress designed for this occasion, which is called the Mukhmal thob and headdress called Iwgat with two lines of gold coins and the rest embroidered silk thread. Traditionally, the headdress is given to the bride as a gift from her future husband and the amount and kind of coins -silver or gold-are indications of the groom's and /or the bride's social status. The groom wore a black Jalabya and a white headdress called the hata, shemag, or Kuffeyahh wrapped with a black belt called `Iqal. Many of the attendees wore cultural clothing including some men who wore Demaya and sherwal, a Palestinian fellaheen countryside piece. The ladies wore very decorative and colorful Gulf area Abayia or Palestinian embroidered thoub. The attendees were a mixture of members from Arab and Muslim communities, Marquette students and faculty, and the general public.

In the beginning of the celebration, the groom and the bride entered the wedding hall. Behind them came a group of men and women from their family and friends singing a folk song accompanied with rhymed clapping, this was called the Dakhla, the entering, marking the beginning of the celebration. The couple was then seated on their chairs (the "looge") inside the traditional tent. The group of friends and relatives, as well as other attendees, kept clapping, singing and dancing for the couple.

The celebration became tremendously exciting when a Debka group created in 2011 by the students from the Arabic Club (which is a part of Marquette's Arabic program) performed this traditional dance. The group was practicing for months and was meeting weekly for this purpose. Usually the Debka is an important part of the wedding celebration culture in the Arab world. It is a folkloric dance that expresses joy and happiness as well as pride of the culture. Women from the groom's and the bride's families as well their friends held hands and danced in a circle making similar steps and moved with the rhythm of the folkloric songs and music expressing solidarity and enjoyment in celebrating the harmony of the marrying couple. At the end of the performance, the bride, the groom, and all attendees joined in and swirled together.

After the Debka, a number of women from the community made two semi-circles and sang traditional songs a cappella with the only accompaniment of people clapping. Those among them who knew the lyrics, especially the elders, led the first group, and the second group responded by repeating the verse. This type of folkloric song is normally performed at the beginning of the wedding, before the music begins. Usually such demonstrations are seen in most weddings not only in the Al-Berieh-Ramallah region, but also in the United States, where Arab and especially Palestinian communities practice these customs.

The dinner was offered in the most authentic way possible. The food was called mansaf. It consists of lamb meat cooked in sour dry yogurt soup. The soup is then drizzled on a thin bread, then rice placed on the top, then the meat, then the almond roasted nuts, and parsley for decoration. This is the most common meal that is often offered during weddings and other joyful occasions. Everyone at the Henna Night enjoyed the food. Some attendees who ate the Mansaf for the first time were very pleased with the taste and they made sure to take some of the leftovers home. The dessert that was offered was called baklawa mushakala, different shaped sweets stuffed with nuts.

Next came the time for the henna design. A group of women wearing traditional attire came inside the hall singing for the bride and the groom and dancing with the henna baskets. After they sang and performed a dance in front of the groom and the bride, a young lady, who knows how to apply the henna, decorated the bride's hand and a young man from the Arab community decorated the groom's hand. That was the last segment of the Henna Night. As a conclusion, the attendees wished the couple a happy life and took pictures with them and then started leaving the hall.

Terence Miller, the Director of the Office of International Education who was among the attendees of the Henna Night celebration together with his family commented: "The Henna Cultural night transported Marquette students, faculty and staff into the customs of an Arab village thousands of miles away. From the bedouin tent to the women dressed in colorful traditional dress the night represented the very best of what an authentic cultural event can do...have someone not from that culture envision themselves in the reality of another people. This transformation occurs in dress, food, music, tradition, dance and a new understanding through the lens of marriage of the oneness of all people who inhabit the earth."

Enaya Othman

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Henna Night Photos
Photo Credit: Shams Studio



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Identity among Second Generation Arab Immigrants

Rawan Atari

Immigrants leave their homeland for various reasons, and while pursuing their life in a new country they are faced with an environment that encompasses two cultures.

The environment a person is surrounded by and grows up in plays an important role in the way each individual chooses to identify. Second generation immigrants are surrounded in a bicultural setting with Arab and American culture present in their everyday lives. While trying to stay connected with their parent's homeland as well as trying to understand their role in the American culture, an individual tries to develop a sense of identity which encompasses their values. The strength of cultural identity in second generation Arab and Muslim immigrants varies from one immigrant to another as each individual tries to consciously understand the impact their dual cultures play in shaping personality.

Cultural identity is the identity of an individual as influenced by one's belonging to an exclusive community and/or culture. Location, gender, race, history, religion, language and ethnicity are all cultural identifiers in the various collections of self-identifiers that have generated a vast amount of social theories aimed to investigate the role of culture in identity. In countries such as the United States, the population's unity is based primarily on common social values and beliefs, therefore, creating the need for second generation immigrants to develop their own sense of identity that encompasses the social values of the country, as well as the values of their parent's homeland. The environment that surrounds individuals as they grow up impacts the culture one may

choose to abide by. Many immigrants feel the need, either consciously or subconsciously, to change their culture in order to fit into the popular culture, causing an internal conflict within the individual as they try to balance their opposing cultures.

An environment which encompasses the cultural identifiers of language, religion and history plays an important role in determining the strength of culture within self-identity. Throughout interviews conducted with three second generation Palestinian Americans, two interviewees spent parts of their childhood living in the Middle East while another interviewee grew up primarily in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. One common theme throughout all three interviews is the desire to keep Palestinian culture intact throughout the generations to come. When the culture becomes a diminishing role, people begin to lose a part of them that may be hard to find once lost.

Monaal, a second generation Arab woman started elementary school in the Milwaukee public school district and then moved to Al-Bireh, Palestine for four years with her family. While speaking of her time in Al-Bireh, Monaal explains the role Palestine played in her strong connection to the Arabic language. As she said during her interview, "I don't think we [Monaal and her sisters] would've picked up Arabic unless being submerged in it." Language is crucial in creating a sense of companionship within a community,

and language certifies that bond in community. As well as language, Monaal shared memories about places she spent most of her time as a child and reminisced about her family as well as her feelings of comfort and love while attending the local mosque. When asked how she identifies herself, Monaal responded "I identify myself as a Muslim first, Arab second." Although she felt comfortable with her identity while in an Islamic and Arab community, when she returned to high school in Milwaukee she said, "we felt like complete outsiders, you know we spent four years of our lives overseas and during those four years I felt like we completely missed out of the American culture." Spending four years living in Al-Bireh helped Monaal reaffirm her identity in an environment she was not entirely familiar with because she used her experiences in Palestine to find the confidence she needed to stay strong to her beliefs in an environment that made her feel outnumbered. Monaal expressed, "We weren't afraid to be our own people so we never really conformed to high school... we were just our own person, and we learned that was good enough." While concluding her interview, Monaal wanted to express why being Palestinian enabled her with sense of pride and much of that pride, as she explained, is due to the history of the Palestinian people. As a little girl Monaal watched her mother sit at the edge of her seat worried while watching the news about the complex political entrapments in Palestine and Monaal never understood why her

mother acted as she did. It wasn't until Monaal experienced life in Palestine that she began to understand her mother's reactions. Monaal spoke about the emotion of unity and a common identity that connected Palestinians, "all those emotions have built up not only from your experience but from generations of what was going on...just feeling oppressed as a people I think that's what connects us all." With a strong sense of identity enforced by an environment of language, religion, and history, Monaal feels a sense of security with who she is and who she wants her children to be.

Riham, a second generation Palestinian woman, grew up primarily in Milwaukee and is currently raising her children in the Milwaukee area. Riham attended both the private Islamic school for Sunday religion classes and Milwaukee public schools from kindergarten to high school graduation. Riham identifies with both her American and Arab culture but feels as if the morals and values she adheres by come from her Arab culture first and foremost. When asked about the values she has attained from the Arab culture and her parents, she has learned to, "do what you want, don't ever think you're less than anyone else either." The emphasis she placed on teaching her children to be proud of the traits that make them different as well as teaching them the importance of being honest, good people was highlighted in her interview. Traditional recipes, the language, her children and visits to Palestine keep Riham connected to her Arab culture. The last time she visited Palestine was in 1996, "it was nice, it was peaceful. You're kind of more relaxed, I think you're more at ease." Riham feels comfortable staying in Palestine and redrawing lines to family members still living there. Although her children have not experienced life firsthand in an Arab country she does her best to shape an environment which encompasses the good of the culture. Constantly surrounding her children with aspects of their Arab culture, Riham teaches

her youngest daughter how to cook traditional foods and enrolls all three of her children in Islamic and Arabic classes. The importance of language was also stressed in Riham's interview. When talking about her children and the fear that they may lose their language as third generation immigrants she said, "they'll forget who they are if they don't even know the language. What's left? They'll be just [like] anybody else; they'll have nothing to carry themselves with." Language strengthens an Arab identity, just as religion does in Riham's opinion. Culture gets lost from generation to generation and Riham says "if you don't keep pushing it, it'll get lost." As a teenager she went through the struggle of being raised culturally rather than religiously, which blurred the lines of what was expected of her due to cultural norms and what was expected of her from Islam. Through the identity confusion Riham experienced as an adolescent, she hopes to guide her children while enforcing their Arab culture and religion in helping them understand why they should be proud of whom they are while embracing the aspects that make them different from any other face in the crowd. At 37 years old, Riham has affirmed her identity and displays her sense of self with the pride and confidence she hopes to give to her children.

Husam, a 20 year old Palestinian American man, experienced life in Amman, Jordan as well as Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Actively engaged in trying to understand his identity, Husam shared his thinking on his own identity. "I'm Palestinian and I'm also an American and then it's a very hard question to answer because you never really find the right balance of which identity you are." At this time in his life, Husam sees himself as "just a human being," and feels as if he remains out of place throughout life. Stating that his principles and values will always remain the same, Husam identifies himself differently depending on the environment. Attending multiple



Rawan Atari

Rawan Atari is a sophomore at Marquette University majoring in Psychology with a focus in Middle Eastern studies: As a second generation Palestinian American I am grateful to be a part of the AMWRRR Oral History project. I have had the privilege of interviewing many Arab women and men in the Milwaukee community and have seen the strength and courage they carry with them from their past into their present. The project has given me the opportunity to understand the roots of my Arab identity, because, in order to know who we are, we must first recognize where we come from. Documenting the stories of immigrants from the Milwaukee Arab and Muslim community is essential in preserving the history of the community while understanding the struggles they encountered in order to get where they are today. I am proud to be a part of a project that sheds light on the contributions of the Muslim and Arab-Christians in our Milwaukee community.

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schools and moving from time to time has made Husam adaptable to the surroundings that encompass his environment. He explains his approach towards his religion and culture and expressed that "if you feel your religion or culture then at least you don't follow it by just the name of it because then it doesn't really have any effects on you." Religion is an important identifier for Husam as is the personal history that ties him to the Palestinian land. As the homeland of his mother and father, and the grave of his father, Palestine stands as a tie to his family and ancestors. Husam expresses the deep feelings he has for the Arabic language and the drive that his culture has provided him with. Rather than strictly focusing on material culture, Husam focuses on the ambition his Arab culture has taught him and says "it's more characteristics so for instance perseverance, drive or motivation, being inspired."

Identities in second generation Arab immigrants have an element of diversity from one individual to another. Living with two contrary cultures leaves adolescents to search for their identity and with that identity, comes commitment to values and principles that an individual chooses to embody. Throughout the oral interviews conducted with second generation immigrants, common contributors to cultural identity are prevalent. Language, history, religion, and gender are all common variables witnessed within the development of identity versus role confusion. While living in an environment with bicultural settings, an individual becomes aware of their dual identities, and in a manner that resembles an individual walking a tightrope, they strive to attain a perfect balance.



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You can participate too!

"The goal of our work at AMWRRRI is to have our history written by our community, so that our children may read about their parents' struggles, accomplishments, culture, religion, and other important aspects of our life. We want our history to be documented as part of American history and as a manifestation of the plurality of American culture and society that many ethnic and religious groups share. Your story is very important for the overall project. Please get in touch and contribute your stories!"

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Visit Our Website at: <http://www.amwrri.org>

Impact of Education on Arab Immigrant Women

Ayia Dahir

Acquiring an education is a fundamental right for all human beings, but for people who reside in various countries in the Middle East, political conflicts, war, occupation, and apartheid prevent civilians from attending schools and receiving what some people might perceive as a “normal” education.

And so, living in such countries that are often insecure and unstable causes, its citizens to feel threatened and endangered. Moreover, it entrenches fear within students as they walk by foot to school or travel a distance to receive an education at a university or college. The right of education becomes a fight for many students living in the Middle East as they battle their way to school grounds.

Education is highly valued among different societies and cultures. Not only does education assist an individual in pursuing a career, it helps define the individual by influencing decisions that make up his or her lifestyle. Take Ola for example. Ola, is a first generation Muslim Arab woman living in the Milwaukee area. She immigrated to the United States in 1994. Growing up in Lebanon during times of war, Ola is grateful that she is able to raise her children in peace here in the United States. Marriage has brought Ola to the U.S. with her husband and her oldest daughter. She decided to stay at home to raise her children and take care of

household chores. This was something that was very important to her, as was routinely volunteering at her children's schools. Religion is another crucial factor in Ola's life. She identifies herself as Muslim Arab Lebanese, and she strives to educate her children about Islam and hopes one day to see them grow up and marry Muslims. Ola is an advocate for equality and believes that gender should not play an issue when raising children. Ola has one boy and three daughters and decides to enforce the same rules upon her son and her girls.

Ola believes in the value of education and remembers being subjected to fear going to and from school during the civil war in Lebanon. She feared being captured or even killed when she would walk to school through the streets of Beirut. Transportation became unavailable, and war made it unsafe for her to attend school at times. Her parents were always very worried when she departed to school as her journey to school and back was by foot. Education is very important to Ola, and she was able to finish high school in Lebanon, but did not receive a

diploma.

Once she arrived in the United States, she was grateful that her children would be able to attend school without the obstacles she had to face as a youngster. And now that she has a daughter in college, Ola says that she did not want to pressure her daughter into studying a subject matter that she wasn't convinced about. Ola's oldest daughter, Alaa, decided she wanted to pursue a career in pharmacy. Although Ola supported her daughter's decision to study pharmacy, she decided to give her a suggestion. Ola expresses, “Alaa is a very active young lady and she like to interact with people and she is very social and I wonder how about if you study something like lawyer, you interact with people so much. In pharmacy you are going to stay in the same place it's going to get boring, so she is still taking chemistry classes, but she also wants to be a lawyer. I also tell her I'm not gonna push you to do because you are the one studying not me and if you wanna choose something you have to love it to study it.” Suggestions were what Ola provided; she never forced her daughter to study a subject or major in something that she did not desire to study.

Another story is told by Afaf, a first generation Palestinian Muslim immigrant living in the Milwaukee area who immigrated to the United States in 1975. Coming to the United States as a young bride with her husband frightened Afaf. She did not finish high school and was 17 years old when she arrived in the United States. She had children and decided not to continue her education, but education was still very important to her. All three of her children finished schooling through 4-year Universities. Afaf identifies herself as a Muslim Palestinian

American. She tries to enforce the same rules amongst her children without paying attention to gender, but at times her daughter had different rules.

Ola and Afaf share a similar experience in that they both did not want to work outside the home. They both decided to stay home and tend to raising their children and attempt to provide their children with all the support they needed to succeed in school and higher education. Although Afaf was from a different country in the Middle East than Ola, they both shared a similar desire and opinion towards the importance of obtaining an education.

When we take a closer look at Afaf and Ola's lives, we find that Afaf's life experience was a bit different than Ola's. Afaf was born in 1957 in a village and there was only a grade school established near her home. In order to attend high school she would have to travel to another city by foot because transportation was not an option. In 1967, the West Bank in Palestine was placed under occupation, making simple tasks such as walking to school very dangerous. Her parents worried about her walking a long distance to attend high school. This resulted in her being absent from school on a regular basis. The occupation also contributed to Afaf becoming unable to complete high school and getting married at a young age. Once she immigrated to the United States, she did not attempt to complete her education. Soon she became pregnant, which prevented her from even considering school as an option. Struggling with assisting her children in middle school with upper level mathematics and science courses, she was obligated to turn her children to her husband for help in addition to a tutor. Afaf expresses, "I hit myself on the head I didn't go and finish my

education you know, but like I said when I first came here I got pregnant and I have to raise the kids and help our with the business and I work for a few years, you know."

Afaf attempted to support her children and only stepped in once she felt that her children needed assistance. She did not try to influence her children's decision towards any career when they were attending 4-year universities. Rather, she supported their choices, except for her oldest son. He decided to study architecture and she suggested that he choose a different major because the job market for an architect is very limited. That was the only moment Afaf attempted to influence the education of her children. However her son did not accept this suggestion and carried on with his own intended major. She stated, "If I see something wrong I step in, but... if they do not do what they enjoy they wont like it." Afaf has been able to watch her children all grow up and become successful. She is thankful for the educational opportunities available in the United States because her children are now highly educated and independent.

Even though Afaf was not highly educated, she was a strong woman who, along with her husband, put all three of her children through college. She understood the value of an education and was able to envision all of her children graduating from 4-year universities. Afaf is glad that all of her children received degrees in areas that they enjoyed because they are able to use those degrees to take care of their families. All three of her children have gotten married and have children of their own and all three of her children strongly believe in education for their own children, Afaf's grandchildren.



Ayia Dahir

My name is Ayia Dahir and I am a junior at Marquette University majoring in Nursing. My parents have immigrated to the United States from Palestine, and their hardships have allowed me to truly appreciate my culture and the strength they have acquired due to their experiences. As a researcher for AMWRRRI, I have had the opportunity to hear some of the strongest of women speak about their personal and emotional childhood experiences in Middle Eastern countries, along with their experiences here in the United States. Their eye-opening experiences have allowed me to have an even greater appreciation for my culture because their stories have led to me truly understanding where I come from. This is beyond important because an individual must understand where he or she comes from prior to identifying with a particular culture. Working for AMWRRRI has been a great experience and has given me the opportunity to closely identify myself with my Palestinian culture, and for that I cannot be thankful enough!

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Caring for the family was highly valued among women who have emigrated from the Middle East. This was a priority that prevented them from continuing their own education. However, once the children were old enough, the mothers began to enroll in schools to complete their education. These fertile educational opportunities that exist in the United States support the right of individuals to acquire the fundamental right of obtaining an education free of harm, hurt, or fear. The opportunities for women overseas were (and continue to be) limited, depending on the country. Immigrant Arab women in the United States today are quick to obtain an education because it is more accessible. In addition, the lack of opportunity that these women had in their original countries created a maternal desire, a powerful force that caused them to truly want something better for their own children. They continued to support and encourage their children to pursue higher levels of education and aspire to be active, functioning vibrant members of their communities. The successful rates of Arab Americans enrolled in U.S. universities today are multiplying and are contributing positively to both the Arab communities and American society at large. Therefore, immigrant Arab women should be recognized for their sacrifices and contributions that, in turn, paved way for their children's success in pursuing and acquiring higher education.



Henna Night Photos

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