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Tourism, Sex, and Beirut

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Rebuilding a city is an enormous undertaking for any society. In the case of Beirut, rebuilding is a constant state of affairs. The Lebanese civil war (1975-1990), and most recently, the Israeli attack and siege of the city in summer 2006, is cause to reflect on this cycle of destruction and reconstruction. My work in Beirut focuses on the physical reconstruction and design of the city. Yet, when questioned about these processes, my informants regularly alluded to the increasing sex-tourism in

downtown Beirut. This brief article relates some of my findings regarding sex-tourism in Beirut as expressed to me by locals, tour guides, tourists, and some who worked within the industry.

Beirut serves the pleasures of its tourists. It is the chameleon city, catering to any desire. As many locals and visitors liked to say, ‘anything you want can be found in abundance in Beirut.’

Two types of nightclubs operate in Beirut—nightclubs and super-nightclubs. The financial exchange for sexual favors may or may not occur in the nightclub setting. Super-nightclubs contain nudity and strip shows, and hold the expectation that sexual favors will occur at the right price. Those women who become good dancers are no longer expected to perform sexual acts, but may do so for a considerable price. The young women contracted as dancers are often unaware of the true nature of the work they are expected to perform. When they do arrive in Beirut, the hiring contractor (the ‘pimp’) illegally confiscates their passports and forces them into sex work through the super-nightclub circuit and through special hire. Women who refuse are violently raped and beaten.

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Lebanese law permits prostitution, but requires that brothels be licensed. In an attempt to limit legal prostitution, the government has restricted the granting of new licenses. Thus, many brothels and prostitutes practice illegally. In 1998, then President Amil Lahoud passed a law forbidding brothels where women had rooms and beds for sex work. However, to bypass this law, the official status of these establishments changed to “nightclubs,” where women were picked up and taken to other locations, permitting the shadow operation of the sex industry. The official law permits the government to claim a restrictive stance on prostitution, yet reap the benefits of increased tourist revenue from those seeking sexual adventure.

Beyond the projection of Beirut as a playground, the sexual consumption of female bodies becomes a tourist attraction. Additionally, the consumed bodies are not merely marked as female, but certain bodies are sold as commodities of higher or lesser value based on national origin. This is reflective of the global order and

hierarchy between nations. Near the top of this value pyramid are women from Belarus, Ukraine, and Romania who take approximately US $1000 per night (most of this going to her pimp). Women positioned with lower value are Ethiopian who cost US $25 per nightly entertainment, followed by Filipino women and finally, Sri Lankan women, who take 10,000 LL (US $6.50). The lower valued women also tend to operate independent of the night clubs and tend to cater to local Lebanese men.

A more recent addition to the sex industry is an increase in participation from Iraqi women. Those who have lost their husbands to the United States bombardment of Iraq, find their way to Beirut, via Damascus, into the sex-work industry. For most, this is their only means of survival, especially if they have no other training or skills in which to support themselves. If they are young, their pimp will sell them as virgins, which fetch the highest price in the sex market (US $1000 +). Moreover, the pimp usually contracts with a medical doctor who performs hymen reconstruction surgery on the young women so that they may be resold as virgins.

A common perception by many local Beirutis is that behind the wealth displayed by the Khaleej, is moral 'filth' in their beliefs and practices. Rami, a young man who is subcontracted to paint the newly erected facades of the buildings in downtown, holds an additional job as a driver for one of the super-nightclub pimps. He explains his perception of downtown Beirut and its connection to sexual consumption.

"Half the people downtown don't buy anything. It's nice, but there are nicer and cheaper places. It's [downtown] not for us; it's not for the Lebanese—not for the wages of two days work for one night here. It's made for tourists, mostly al-khaligiya [Arabs from the Gulf] … the Saudi tourist goes two places, downtown with family and supernights with prostitutes … Saudis are filthy, I wouldn't work painting their homes. When you work for them, they own you. The Khalij are dirty and if you sit with them, you get disgusted watching them eat—even though they have money, they stink. Once I went to pick up some women from a Saudi after they had stayed with him. They had bruises all over them. Many Khalij like rough sex … mostly they beat the women."

Rami's attitudes were shared by many other Beirutis. The city's downtown is seen as not belonging to them, but rather for tourists, specifically those from the Gulf States in search of sexual adventure. The location of sexual adventure in BCD is witnessed by many Lebanese as a place that permeates with moral corruption that

presents a danger to Lebanese society as a whole. Linda, the wife of a lieutenant in the Lebanese Army said she does not visit the central district at night during the summer tourist season, especially not with her young fifteen year old daughter. She explains that, “The Khaleej come every summer and destroy our city. They have money, but they are still dirty and uncivilized. They are a bad influence on our society and young women.” Although needed for economic growth by the state and the tourism industry, sex tourism is perceived to make Lebanese culture vulnerable to uncivilized Khaleeji morality. This contradiction is further compounded by yet another, namely the tension between conflicting notions of morality and civility, as Lebanese struggle to define themselves as modern and western.

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Based on the manner in which sex tourism is discussed, the presumption is that only Khaleejis are engaged in sex tourism. The belief that European men would not come all the way to Beirut for sex with European women and the assumption that Lebanese women do not engage in ‘that sort of behavior,’ serves as an organizing principle to understand the emphasis on Khaleeji sex tourists. This basis permits the construction of the Khaleej as a dirty moral danger to Lebanese culture.

Lebanese women are also involved in sex work, however, they only prostitute with foreign men for fear that in providing sexual services to Lebanese men, their families and local communities may find out. This is a key strategy used to manage reputation, a most valued social capital that influences all aspects of one’s life. A woman’s reputation alone is not only at stake, but the reputation of her kin which can have devastating effects on clan networks and economic access.

The myths of modernity and rebirth drape the image and reputation of Beirut as a place of desire where the fantasy of consumption, designer goods, and commoditized bodies are possible. Beirut’s cosmopolitan spirit, taken to excess, as many things are in Beirut, encompasses its tourist consumption of sexualized and nationalized female bodies. Beirut’s cosmopolitanism is turned into an “international buffet” where women of the world, whose bodies are nationally marked (i.e. Ukrainian, Ethiopian, Syrian, and Iraq), are presented on a sampling platter to the highest bidder—giving new meaning to ‘national cuisine.’

Through the prevalent myths of Beirut's resurrection, contradictions emerge between western modernity and moral corruption on one hand and Khaleeji (eastern) morality and sexual desire on the other. In one sense, they are both viewed as corrupting by different segments of the population. Middle and upper class communities, desiring their own pleasures and economic benefits from westernization and Lebanon's inclusion in the global economic system, mimic western styles and mannerisms and look upon the Khaleeji tourists as animal-like—made wild by their sexual urges. The presence of Khaleeji tourists during the summer months offends the sensibilities of many self-defined 'cosmopolitans' residing in the city. Khaleeji men walking with their two or three wives and their children in tow through downtown Beirut (the heart of the city and the nation) fills many Lebanese with concern and threatens the perception of Beirut as a modern, cosmopolitan, city with a characteristic 'Lebanese culture' and identity.

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