

Moritz A. Mihatsch and Richard Gauvain

Branding the United Arab Emirates as Nation Building? Constructing Unity versus Acknowledging Diversity

1 Introduction

In 2019, for the second time, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) started a project to create a logo to represent the identity of the UAE in the form of a “nation brand.”¹ Nation branding as a concept emerged in the late 1990s as a product of the neoliberal shift towards a global competition of places and in extension of place branding. The field is characterised by a number of dominant practical and marketing discourses. Keith Dinnie, who wrote the first textbook on nation branding, described the “key objectives” of nation branding as centring “upon the stimulation of inward investment, the promotion of a country’s branded exports and the attraction of tourists.”² Dinnie does not anticipate the effects of nation branding on the nation – the nation brand is merely meant to communicate to the outside world. Indeed, Browning and de Oliveira spy a “dissonance” between nation branding and nation-building.³ The same relationship is at the centre of a more critical body of literature, which sees “nation branding as a compendium of discourses and practices aimed at reconstituting nationhood through marketing and branding paradigms.”⁴ In this understanding, nation branding is viewed as a form of commercial, neoliberal nationalism.⁵ Particularly in places where the nation may be perceived as “under construction” – due, for instance, to a recent declaration of independence and/or conflict – nation branding projects can intersect with nation-building, such as in South Africa⁶ or Suriname.⁷

Only a handful of articles have tackled nation branding in the Middle East. Those that do tend to carry a practical and marketing focus. For instance, Zeined-

1 The previous project was completed in 2012, but the logo was rarely used thereafter. Cf. Hughes, 2012; Essaidi, 2012.

2 Dinnie, 2007: 31.

3 Cf. Browning and Oliveira, 2017: 492.

4 Kaneva, 2011: 118.

5 Cf. Volčič and Andrejevic, 2011: 614.

6 Cf. Cornelissen, 2017: 525.

7 Cf. Hoefte and Veenendaal, 2019: 173.

dine compares nation branding in the UAE and Qatar.⁸ Notably though, the article treats Dubai and Abu Dhabi individually, rather than as components of the UAE. The most comprehensive discussion of nation branding in the Middle East is Miriam Cooke's book *Tribal Modern: Branding New Nations in the Arab Gulf*. Cooke observes: "Cultural uniqueness is being fabricated out of whole cloth to distinguish new countries from each other but also from their past. The challenge is to mesh individual memories of belonging to an unbounded territory with official histories of borders and flags."⁹ Additionally, multiple MA theses explore the topic. For example, Moshashai explored the UAE's Vision 2021 as a tool to further the UAE's nation brand, concluding: "The goal behind Vision 2021 is therefore to project a certain image to the world, one which is characterized by tolerance, high-modernism and dynamism."¹⁰

To date, scholars have primarily focused on the practical and marketing aspects of nation branding in Middle Eastern contexts (the UAE included). This chapter, by contrast, argues that, as a project, nation branding in the UAE must be understood through the lens of nation-building. Accordingly, the project is situated within the wider literature on the construction of Emirati identity. This chapter advances the following arguments: first, the design and promotion of the UAE's nation branding project reflects and reinforces established political hierarchies and structures. Simultaneously, it is one of multiple strategies by which the UAE government seeks to embrace the seemingly contradictory dimensions of the local/traditional versus the global/modern. Many Emiratis are in agreement both with the UAE's established hierarchies and structures and with the government's efforts to reconcile the dualisms. Incorporated into the nation brand project is a comparatively fresh appreciation of the role of visual arts in promoting national solidarity. However, not all Emiratis perceive the nation branding process – or the winning logo – in a positive light; and a minority questions its relevance to their own cultural and political identity.

The chapter relies on material published by the UAE government, a variety of interviews, and the UAE's media discourse on the subject. Due to restrictions imposed by Covid-19, it was not possible to conduct interviews in person. Instead, all research took place virtually, through interviews on Skype and other media. Moritz Mihatsch spoke to three artists – Aysha al-Hemrani, Azza al-Qubaisi, and Abdulgader al-Rais – involved directly in the nation brand project. To gain an understanding of how ordinary Emiratis view the project, Richard Gauvain conducted

⁸ Cf. Zeineddine, 2017.

⁹ Cooke, 2014: 170.

¹⁰ Moshashai, 2018: 77.

one-on-one interviews with twenty-five former students from the American Universities in Dubai and Ras al-Khaimah, where he worked from 2009 to 2017. The interviews consisted of ten pre-prepared questions and were semi-structured. Interviewees were aged 25–42; just over 40% were female. A key correspondent agreed to distribute anonymous online surveys at her place of employment, in Dubai's Expo 2020 project. 31 colleagues completed the survey, which consisted of the same ten questions adapted slightly to fit the new format. Overall, the sample size of interviewees is small; hence, findings must be treated as suggestive.¹¹

The chapter continues by reflecting on the unique history of the UAE as a political unit and exploring key trends in the literature on the construction of Emirati identity. The next section describes the stages of the nation brand project. The fieldwork findings are then introduced and discussed in light of the literature's key trends.

2 Nation-Building and National Identity in the UAE

The history of the UAE as a nation-state begins in December 1971, when six of the seven “sheikhdoms” – Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Ajman, Umm al-Quwayn, and Fujairah – formally proclaimed the UAE as an independent state with its own constitution. The seventh sheikhdom or emirate, Ras al-Khaimah, delayed slightly to secure better terms, before joining the federation in February 1972.

Reflecting on the UAE's short but complex history, scholars have drawn attention to the internecine rivalries that characterised tribal life in the seven pre-federation sheikhdoms of “The Trucial States”, a place where, historically, coups had frequently occurred and that was now united only inasmuch as its separate leaders had agreed to a truce with Britain. At first the new federal state remained a fragile compromise, and particularly the nature of the political alliance between Abu Dhabi and Dubai, both of which maintained their own air forces until the end of the 1990s, was unclear. While some scholars continue to remark on the potential for friction between the different emirates, a consensus has emerged that, despite (or more accurately because of) the inequalities between the different emirates, political stability – as well as major economic and technological advance – has been mostly achieved.

¹¹ For overall readability and brevity, quotes from the interviews and questionnaires are given without further referencing.

The country's leadership offers its own official, necessarily sanitised, version of the UAE's history.¹² Not surprisingly, this version glosses over tribal divisions and leadership squabbles, attributing the modern economic success to the wisdom and charisma of the federation's first leaders. Two men stand out: the "Father of the Nation", Sheikh Zayed Al Nahyan (1918–2004) of Abu Dhabi, and Sheikh Rashid Sa'id Al Maktoum (1912–1990) of Dubai. The official history reports how these two men met to agree upon an "Initial Accord" – to conduct "foreign affairs, defence, security and social services and to adopt a joint immigration policy." In only a short space of time, they won over the remainder of the leaders and their peoples to the concept of a federation of monarchies. In addition to paying tribute to leadership, the UAE's official history notes key factors embedded in the fabric of the land and people: the enduring importance of the area as a trading centre and the richness (and harshness) of the geographical environment. Before oil, there was the pearl trade, bringing wealth as pearls were exported across the globe. The rapid expansion of the UAE's economy, the result of the discovery and production of oil in the early 1960s, fits neatly within this narrative. The official version of the UAE's history invariably concludes by celebrating the fact that all Emiratis now enjoy free education, healthcare, and social support from the federal government. This achievement – and others, such as "the remarkable advancement of Emirati women in every aspect of life" – stand as a testament to the proud successes of the UAE as a nation-state. The same accounts also celebrate the development of a concrete "Emirati national identity" alongside and – in this narrative at least – superior to traditional allegiances to tribe: the UAE "is the only federal state in the Arab world that has not only survived but succeeded in creating a distinctive national identity with the passage of time."

The emergence of this concrete national identity – rooted in (what is presented as) a single, shared history – can at least partially be explained as necessary due to the political transformation of the UAE from a confederation into a more centralised entity. Especially today, with sovereignty invariably legitimised through the nation, pooling sovereignty necessitates a different imagined community as a legitimating basis. There was another component here, however. The death in 2004 of the UAE's founder Zayed Al Nahyan – whose charismatic personality had long served as a central unifying symbol – galvanised the UAE's authorities into launching any number of nation-building projects so as strengthen Emirati ties to the nation.

Parallel to and intersecting with discussions of Emirati history, we find a flourishing ethnographic debate on the construction of Emirati national identities.

12 For the quotes in this paragraph, see UAE Ministry of Presidential Affairs, 2018.

Three trends within this literature are identified here. The first explores the country's burgeoning heritage industry. In this approach, an Emirati identity is formed by and with primary reference to its political elites. Ordinary activities – such as traditional gatherings and practices – are invested with multiple meanings, which are purposefully framed in relation to the nation and its hierarchies. Sulayman Khalaf adopts this perspective, for instance, when he explains the popular sport of camel racing as “a newly invented tradition” – one that was consciously created by the UAE's heritage department to promote a pastime sufficiently “authentic,” as a strategy to assuage rising anxieties among the local population regarding the UAE's changing economic and technological landscape, as well as its worries over the massive influx of immigrant workers.¹³ In the face of such changes, Khalaf argues that the UAE's heritage industry itself was created with the aim of “manipulating cultural symbols” to bolster the state's narrative on Emirati identity.

The second trend within the literature on Emirati national identity explores the juxtaposition of global and local dimensions. Martin Ledstrup argues that, while such tensions between global and local (and modernity and tradition) are found in many societies, there is something uniquely Emirati about the choices taken by young locals to maintain the balance between these opposing conceptual categories.¹⁴ When going to bars, for instance, Ledstrup's respondents make sure not to wear their traditional robes to avoid these being polluted by either the settings or the alcohol. Ledstrup notes that, while the same individuals enjoy going to bars and drinking, they understand such pleasures to be inherently non-Emirati, “global,” and, therefore, as not to be mingled with pure symbols of local tradition. Conversely, Ledstrup's Emirati respondents embrace “car culture” – a quintessentially global phenomenon – by decking out their imported cars in the colours of the flag and with images of Sheikh Zayed in the run-up to National Day. In the former example, Ledstrup's respondents attribute danger to the global and seek to preserve the purity of the local; in the latter example, his respondents seek to localise – and thereby to appropriate – the global. For Ledstrup, Emiratiness is best understood in terms of the choices whether to conform, transgress, or appropriate perceptions of national identity in relation to the global/local.

In contrast to the aforementioned authors, a third trend explores what it means to identify as an Emirati while simultaneously cherishing allegiances to one's specific emirate and/or tribe. As tribal loyalty has historically led to political tensions, this is potentially a sensitive subject. Jane Bristol-Rhys, however, has discussed competing historical narratives among Emiratis. She identifies five such

¹³ Cf. Khalaf, 2000.

¹⁴ Cf. Ledstrup, 2019.

narratives, each of which explains the formation of the federation in different terms by favouring a particular sheikh and his people (although Sheikhs Zayed and Rashid – not necessarily in this order – are always treated as the most significant). As Bristol-Rhys observes, the role of the British in these contrasting narratives – as villains or friends – also differs. Among Bristol-Rhys’ narratives, the final one belongs to the younger generation: “[I]t is a narrative of unqualified success, no doubts, no misgivings and the promise of a brighter future.” There is no need to speak of pre-Federation history at all: “In the same way that the times of pre-Islamic *jahiliyya* is ignored, young Emiratis avoid talking about their pre-oil past.”¹⁵

3 The Nation Brand Project

On 2 November 2019, one day before Flag Day, the UAE announced a project to create a national logo. Sheikh Mohamed Al Maktoum wrote on Twitter: “Today, we launch a new national project to share the UAE’s story with the world. The UAE’s nation brand project will reflect our unique values.”¹⁶ The launch video firmly embedded the project in classical nation branding projects, comparing it to logos used for tourism promotion and public diplomacy from Singapore to Egypt. Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan (known as MBZ), Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, who co-hosted the project, stated: “We are at the heart of the global economic, social, and cultural movement. We must have new tools that (...) reflect our civilisational and human values.”¹⁷ While official early announcements framed the logo as primarily addressed to the outside world, the project’s social media channels posted mostly in Arabic,¹⁸ demonstrating that the brand-making process was intended primarily for a local audience.

This was not the first initiative that aimed to strengthen a collective UAE national identity. The same aim permeated the language of the UAE Vision 2021, originally formulated in 2010, which is organised under the headings “United in Prosperity,” “United in Knowledge,” “United in Destiny,” and “United in Responsibility.”¹⁹ The vision specifically mentioned a shift of national identification from the individual emirates to the UAE: “The Federation will continue to rise in the national consciousness to represent the defining point of allegiance for all Emiratis.”²⁰ Since 2013, the annu-

¹⁵ Bristol-Rhys, 2009: 116.

¹⁶ Al Maktoum, tweet 2 November 2019, 11:00 AM.

¹⁷ Al Nahyan, tweet 2 November 2019, 10:04 AM. Translation by the authors.

¹⁸ Cf. The United Arab Emirates Nation Brand, 2021; UAE Nation Brand, 2021a and 2021c.

¹⁹ UAE Ministry of Cabinet Affairs, 2010.

²⁰ UAE Ministry of Cabinet Affairs, 2010.

al Flag Day similarly celebrates a united nation. Other events, such as the Expo Dubai 2020, as well as the “Year of 50” on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of UAE independence, also strengthen the narrative of national unity. Kristian Alexander and Leonardo Mazzucco described the Expo as “nation-building through spectacle.”²¹ Love for the leadership is, of course, woven into the same narrative. Flag Day marks the day when the presidency passed from the UAE’s founder Zayed Al Nahyan to his son Khalifa. The official “pillars” of the Year of 50 include “contemplat[ing] the values and achievements of (...) the UAE’s Founding Fathers” and “inspiring youth to have their vision about the next 50 years.”²² The new nation brand logo has been linked directly to this anniversary, as it will represent the UAE in the coming fifty years.²³ Additionally, various heritage sites and exhibitions convey the same message. For instance, before stepping up to the viewing platform, visitors to Dubai’s *Burj Khalifa* encounter an exhibit commemorating the UAE’s founders. Interestingly, this exhibition includes noteworthy non-Emiratis, such as the captain of the highest crane used to build the tower.

For the nation brand project, a group of artists and creatives was assembled and presented to the public as the “Inspiring 49.” The executive councils of the seven emirates each selected seven representatives. The Inspiring 49 included 24 women and 25 men. It represented different generations: the youngest participant was the author Dubai Abulhoul, born in 1996; the most senior artists – whom Aysha al-Hemrani, one of the 49, called “the first generation of UAE artists” – were Abdulqader al-Rais and Obaid Suroor. Al-Rais was already twenty and had started his artistic career when the UAE were founded in 1971. Suroor studied Fine Arts in Cairo and graduated in 1979. Interestingly, none of the artists were paid. Azza al-Qubaisi – a sculptor and jeweller and one of the seven team leaders – said that she participated because she wanted to be “part of our national identity giving” and that “it was a great honour” and “an opportunity to be part of something that will be historical.”

The Inspiring 49 participated in a two-day workshop from 18 to 19 November 2019 at the Dubai Design District. In the workshop, the artists were divided into seven groups, each including one member from each of the seven emirates. The first day featured a series of opening remarks and training presentations – al-Qubaisi described it as “a crash course” aiming “to put us in the right direction, and to motivate and inspire us.” Members of the groups began to work together in small exercises. The second day was more focused. By its end, the groups had all pro-

²¹ Alexander and Mazzucco, 2021.

²² UAE Telecommunication Regulatory Authority, 2021.

²³ See Al Maktoum, tweet 17 December 2019, 12:56 PM.

duced two to three different proposals – in varying degrees of completion – for the UAE’s nation brand. Each proposal was attached to a story that explained the logic of the design and its symbolism. Recalling the different concepts, al-Qubaisi observed, “We all had overlaps because we all have similar backgrounds and feelings towards our country.”

The creative step complete, a third party – unidentified in the official narrative and unknown to our interviewees – condensed the different concepts into three polished nation brand proposals. Al-Hemrani said that one of the three final options “derived from our idea,” even if it was “quite different”; and for the logo, which was selected for the nation brand in the end, he remarked, “I actually know the exact group that presented that.” Al-Qubaisi however argued that the winning logo was derived from proposals by two teams. She further pointed out that for the narratives explaining the symbolism of the three final options “99% were taken from [the explanations attached to the draft logos by] the different teams.” However, the details of this were never made public. Al-Hemrani said: “They don’t announce it like this, like: this group won.” Instead, the logos are presented as the product of all 49 artists. Both the fact that the third party remains unnamed and the fact that no specific groups were highlighted as winners demonstrate the importance of portraying Inspiring 49 as *collective authors* of the nation brand. The tactic of representing the Inspiring 49 themselves by a logo – four green and red geometric shapes, forming an abstract “49”²⁴ – reflects the same aim. Ultimately, all aspects of the creative process must be viewed within the mechanics and as integral part of the state-led nation branding exercise.

The three proposed logos (cf. Fig. 1) were called “7 Lines,” “The Palm,” and “Emirates in Calligraphy.” Each logo was introduced to the public with a short explanation of its symbolism.²⁵ The calligraphic logo reflects “authenticity and originality,” with the “rolling curves of the font captur[ing] the flow of ocean waves merging with the sand dunes of UAE’s golden desert.” “The smooth and harmonious movement of the letters symbolises the constant human and social progress.” The palm tree was presented as “forming an indispensable part of its [the UAE’s] history and distinctive identity as an unconditional giver.” The plant’s ability to survive adverse natural conditions is meant to reflect “the willpower of the leaders and people of UAE.” Finally, the 7 Lines are meant to represent the seven emirates and their seven leaders who “united their people’s aspirations under one flag.” The lines collectively shape the map of the UAE and the colours of the design

²⁴ The logo is shown, for example, in one of the announcement videos on the UAE Nation Brand YouTube channel, UAE Nation Brand, 2019: Min. 0:44.

²⁵ These narratives were broadly publicised. All quotes in this paragraph are taken from the official press release: Aamir, 2019.



Fig. 1: The three prosed logos in the UAE nation brand project

Sources: UAE Nation Brand, 2021b; The National, 2019.

refer to the colours of the flag. “The lines, vibrant in colour, reflect the UAE’s ongoing journey of development driven by a wave of progress, innovation, excellence, and boundless aspirations.”

With the three logos ready, an online vote took place from 17 to 31 December. The vote was open internationally to Emiratis and non-Emiratis. Al Maktoum explained the decision to open the vote to the whole world: “Everyone contributed to our country’s success story, and we invite everyone to be part of choosing the best logo that represents our story. (...) People’s participation from all over the world reflects the values of openness and inclusivity we adopt in the Emirates.”²⁶ The UAE authorities promised that, for each vote submitted in the two weeks, they would plant a tree, thus linking the project to battling climate change. The vote attracted 10.6 million votes from 185 countries. Only 15% of the votes came from the UAE, which still topped the list of countries by number of votes, followed by India, the US, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia. Al-Qubaisi said that “as a campaign it went really well, a lot of the people I know, my friends, my family totally engaged with it at a very personal level.”

The “7 Lines” logo was officially announced as the winner on 8 January 2020. The logo is used together with the slogan “Impossible is Possible,” referencing a quote from Al Maktoum: “The word ‘impossible’ is not in leaders’ dictionaries. No matter how big the challenges, strong faith, determination and resolve will overcome them.”²⁷ Since then, the logo has been broadly used by authorities, for example on stamps, and by various UAE-based companies, like on a credit card

²⁶ Salim, 2019.

²⁷ UAE Ministry of Cabinet Affairs, 2010.



Fig. 2: Instagram post celebrating the successful Mars mission, showing the nation brand logo superimposed on the red planet
Source: nationbranduae, 2021.

by Emirates Islamic. Most remarkable were a marketing campaign for domestic tourism, which also was the first federal tourism campaign, and the use of the logo on the Emirati Mars probe (Fig. 2). Sarah al-Amiri, Minister of State for Advanced Sciences, stated: “By attaching the UAE Nation Brand to the Hope Probe, we are showing that the essence of our identity, principles, objectives and actions are not bound by earthly limitations.” And referencing the brand’s slogan, she continued: “We have built a nation that does not think there is such a thing as ‘impossible.’”²⁸

²⁸ Khaleej Times, 19 January 2020.

4 Field Research and Analysis

4.1 Hierarchy, Heritage, and Art

Discussing the newly invented tradition of camel racing, Khalaf treats the construction of national identity as a top-down initiative, intended to bolster solidarity as well as established political hierarchies – what Prasenjit Duara would call “regimes of authenticity.”²⁹ Khalaf’s approach fits neatly in the present context: the nation brand project clearly upholds key governmental messages.

The most important of these messages is that the UAE has been and will continue to be unified through inspired political leadership and intra-emirate collaboration. In this regard, it is noteworthy that, in the promotional material and social media videos, the statements of Al Maktoum and MBZ were highlighted throughout, while the artists who belonged to the Inspiring 49 were represented mostly collectively by a logo. Recollections by the artists themselves indicate that their sense of personal reward for this project lay, to use al-Qubaisi’s words, in contributing to “our national identity giving,” rather than in receiving money or prestige. For the Inspiring 49, much of the project’s significance was tied to the *process* by which the nation brand logo was designed (rather than to the result). Reflecting on his experiences as part of the project, al-Rais describes this process as manifesting the inherently unified and unifying nature of the UAE, not only between individuals from different emirates, but also between different genders and generations. Al-Rais attributes such harmony to the influence of the UAE’s leadership.

Collating information from our interviews and the survey, we find an understanding among our respondents that the nation brand project should be perceived as an exercise both in building national solidarity and in promoting loyalty to leadership. The fact that virtually everyone interviewed had encountered the project speaks for the effectiveness of the government’s promotion. However, several of the individual respondents also noted that the winning nation brand logo, while intended to be special, is one of several such logos: “There are many logos; the Expo itself has its own logo, which I personally prefer.” Interestingly, only 13% of the survey respondents and two of the individual respondents explained the main motivation behind the project as “promoting tourism and business.” By contrast, 55% of the survey’s respondents – many of whom have advanced degrees in the field of business – attributed the main motivation to a desire “to build a culturally united people (...) to promote the UAE’s leadership and unity,” while a fur-

²⁹ Cf. Duara, 2004: 29–34.

ther 29% believed that it was mainly “to promote a forward-looking attitude.” Overall, most interviewees did not interpret the significance of the nation brand project primarily in business terms.

The above confirms Khalaf’s analysis of UAE identity construction as an inherently political and hierarchising project. The UAE’s nation brand, however, does introduce a distinctive element to this type of argument. While exploring the heritage industry’s re-imagining of traditions, Khalaf acknowledges the role of creativity in the construction of identity. But he rarely integrates the contributions/roles of art or artists, as distinct from historical heritage-based re-imaginings. When our respondents in Dubai and Ras al-Khaimah were asked whether they saw an intrinsic connection between national identity and the art world, very few answered in the affirmative. Although an appreciation of art was not seen as something that was antithetical to Emirati identity (several respondents mentioned Abu Dhabi’s new Louvre Museum and other museums as culturally significant destinations), in our discussions, it was never volunteered as a distinctively Emirati quality.

It is interesting, then, that the artists involved explicitly perceive this situation to be changing. As al-Hemrani observed, while the first generation of Emirati artists were not traditionally taught art in school curricula and they do not feature in the official history summarised above, the UAE government has begun to recognise the “huge impact – economically as well – of artists and the creative community.” Al-Hemrani’s observation is supported by the speech given by the designer of the UAE’s flag, Abdullah Mohammed al-Maena, on the first day of the nation brand workshop, in which he remarked that “the history of the Emirates is made by the creative sons and daughters of the nation.”³⁰ In this new narrative, the Inspiring 49 are not simply creating a logo; they, and by extension the UAE’s creative community as a whole, are contributing to building and are themselves an expression of Emirati identity.

This new aspect of identity construction shares many of the hierarchising attributes identified by Khalaf. While the artists took part in what seems to have been a generous and collegial sharing of ideas, the group leaders were nevertheless the oldest individuals from each emirate (although not all were male). Even in the context of art, seniority commands the greatest respect. An anecdote from al-Rais eloquently makes this point. The logo was officially announced at an event that brought together the Inspiring 49 and various members of the UAE leadership. When the group photograph was taken, al-Rais recalls how, usually at such events, “the sheikhs should be in the front and the artists in the back [... yet, this time],

30 UAE Nation Brand Twitter, tweet 18 November 2019, 6:13 PM.

Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed, the foreign minister, took my hand and made me [stand] in his place [in front] and [went] to stand in the back of me.” In a richly symbolic act, al-Rais’ lifetime of work as an artist was honoured, as he himself arrives at a sufficiently venerable age to enter the pantheon of Emirati leaders.

4.2 Between Local and Global

Ledstrup explores the construction of identity in relation to people’s choices of how to negotiate the seemingly contradictory, yet overlapping spheres of the local and global in everyday life. The nation brand project, its logo (and responses to it) provide a rich opportunity to consider this dualism in the UAE. The government’s own narrative, in line with its own official history, is that – thanks to wise leadership – Emirati culture manages to incorporate and embrace both local and global dimensions. This is done intentionally: the government opened the voting process on the UAE nation brand logo to a truly international audience; at the same time, however, it has chosen only Emirati artists to contribute to the project and promoted it in Arabic on its social media channels.

The apparent tension between a cosmopolitan, inclusive Emiratiness and a more atavistic, essentialist view, has long been part of the UAE’s nation-building efforts. For example, the Vision 2021 stated the goal: “Emiratis’ solid national character will be upheld as a main source of inspiration for the protection and preservation of national identity. *In the face of increasing multiculturalism*, this is a crucial matter of national pride and social stability.”³¹ Moshashai thus observed diplomatically that the Vision 2021 promoted “cosmopolitanism whilst keeping a certain distrust of multiculturalism.”³² However, these boundary lines may be fading. As mentioned above, the exhibit at *Burj Khalifa* highlights also the contributions of non-Emiratis. Reflecting this development, Alexander and Mazzucco argued, “The language of tolerance is deeply embedded within the UAE official state narrative.”³³ In line with this, al-Hemrani argued, “I don’t think the UAE is only consisting of Emirati citizens. Yes, we do have benefits and privileges as citizens, but at the same time we have people who are second- and third-generation expats who are living here.” The fact that the government set out intentionally to use the nation brand (among other strategies) as a means to communicate its cosmopolitan outlook was both recognised and appreciated by the majority of our re-

³¹ UAE Ministry of Cabinet Affairs, 2010. Added emphasis.

³² Moshashai, 2018: 66.

³³ Alexander and Mazzucco, 2021.

spondents. At the same time, this construction of a more globalised identity, tolerant of differences, is not uncontested among Emiratis, as Alexander and Mazzucco pointed out.³⁴

Navigating this intersection of the local and the global has brought with it certain challenges for the artists. The question of how to visually express the quintessential nature of the UAE without preferring a particular emirate and without slipping into irrelevance by choosing an image that might be interpreted as insufficiently Emirati occupied their minds during the artists' workshop in Dubai. Al-Rais neatly summarises this dilemma when critiquing the proposed palm tree logo: "The problem with the palm tree is that it is not only present in the Emirates, but in all countries in the Gulf, in all Arab countries. (...) Even in America. It is not special." To overcome this challenge, al-Hemrani observes, "We all worked really hard on trying to identify what makes us Emirati."

The eventual winner of the competition was received favourably not only by the artists, but also by most of our respondents. This leaves us with the question whether the logo was primarily intended for a local or a global audience or a mixture of both. For al-Hemrani, the aim of the nation brand logo was primarily to unite the global (i. e. non-Emiratis) and locals who live inside the UAE: "We needed something that presents us in the UAE" "to expats and locals." Making no distinction at all between expatriates and locals in the UAE, al-Qubaisi, by contrast, explained the motivation for designing the logo as "50/50" – "internationally and locally." Overall, our interview and questionnaire respondents agree with this view. Interestingly, however, al-Rais noted that the chosen logo might indeed resonate more effectively with an audience in the UAE, on the grounds that foreigners might not recognise its map outline. Discussions of the concepts of global versus local often segue into related discussions of the modern (and globalised) versus the traditional. Al-Hemrani's observation that the chosen logo "is maybe a bit too modern" is, therefore, noteworthy. The same reservation – that the seven lines seem too modern, too abstract, not sufficiently and concretely Emirati – was politely expressed in several of the interviews. On such occasions, however, this reservation was usually accompanied by an acknowledgement that it would have been hard to find a better compromise.

Al-Hemrani's observation reminds us of Ledstrup's argument: contemporary Emiratiness is uniquely linked to discussions of – and choices pertaining to – the global/modern and the local/traditional. In the present discussion, it is worth mentioning that, among our respondents, there were instances of resistance to aspects of the government's strategy to fuse the local/traditional and the global/mod-

³⁴ Alexander and Mazzucco, 2021.

ern. On a handful of occasions, discussion of the nation brand project with respondents in both Dubai and Ras al-Khaimah spurred less familiar responses regarding the political direction in which the UAE is now heading. The UAE's decision in August 2020 to normalise political relations with Israel may not be expected to arise from a discussion on nation branding. However, when asked what aspects of globalisation they found most problematic, one respondent based in Dubai expressed discomfort at precisely this development. While careful not to criticise the decision made by the UAE's leadership, the conversation moved from a reflection on the UAE's economic progress and of how the nation brand reflects a creative, business-minded approach to an admission that this has forced compromises with which they are less than comfortable. Another respondent, in Ras al-Khaimah, remarked tersely that the sole reason that the UAE had "forsaken its brothers and sisters in the Arab world" was "to improve its nation brand."

4.3 Local Identities

Unlike Khalaf and Ledstrup, Bristol-Rhys explores the construction of an Emirati identity in terms of competing narratives. Not surprisingly, given the nature of this project – to present a unified nation, bolster a sense of national identity, and endorse political and cultural hierarchies – neither the artists nor most of the respondents were interested in discussing the nation-state project in terms of tribal difference. This is not to say that the artists were not keenly aware of local differences. As al-Hemrani succinctly stated, "The UAE is not very big, [but] it is totally different when you go to different emirates." Reflecting this duality of unity and separateness, the workshop of the Inspiring 49 was characterised by a particular Emirati version of identity politics: each emirate was represented equally and each emirate selected its own creatives, and at the workshop each team consisted of members from all emirates. In the end, as individual artistic contributions were not recognised, an appearance of unity was generated. Indeed, the final nation brand acknowledges the separateness of the emirates while emphasising the unity of the whole, by featuring seven parallel stripes, which together form one shape, but neither meet nor overlap.

As Bristol-Rhys and others have shown, tribal and inter-emirate differences persist beneath the seemingly harmonious veneer of the modern UAE. It is not our intention to dwell on these differences here. In the context of the nation brand project itself, they deserve brief mention. Conversations with two respondents from tribes traditionally based in Ras al-Khaimah explicitly acknowledged that the nation brand project was of "no interest" and "something quite alien" to them. A single respondent, in Dubai, was even bolder: "and what about the *'ajja-*

mis [Persians] and the Shi'is, and the *bidun* [stateless people living in the emirates], what has this got to do with any of them?"

Such ideas *do* persist, even among some members of the younger generation. However, as Bristol-Rhys would predict, the overwhelming majority of our respondents (all aged in their twenties to forties) expressed little interest in the divisions that preceded the foundation of the state and the discovery of oil. In their view, the unified nation that Vision 2021, for example, aims to will into existence – by continuously repeating the mantra of unity – appears to have become a reality. This also is apparent in a statement by al-Qubaisi describing the differences between emirates: "The culture and tradition aspects differ slightly, the accent of the spoken Arabic also differs from one emirate to the other, in the past it used to be from one tribe to the other, [... also] our food and spices and how we cook and how we engage [differ between emirates]." However, this no longer sounds like competing sub-state nationalisms, but rather like forms of local patriotism, which one would find in regions and cities throughout the world. As new generations of Emiratis have grown up after the unification of the UAE, past differences have become less important; after all, as Ernest Renan argued in 1882, "Forgetting (...) is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation."³⁵

5 Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated how the UAE nation brand project should also be understood as an internally directed project of nation-building. This overlap of nation branding and nation-building is not entirely new for the UAE; it also characterised the earlier Vision 2021 project. Responding to three trends in the literature on the construction of Emirati national identity, this chapter has explored ways in which certain processes of and discourses about Emirati national identity were privileged (or ignored), both in the processes by which the nation brand logo was created and in the responses of Emiratis to these processes (and its result).

In the present context, nation branding – and the winning logo – supports the (ongoing) creation of a "regime of authenticity." In so doing, it legitimises the political strategies of the leadership. Regimes of authenticity are invariably exposed to tensions between tradition and modernity, the national and the global, and authenticity and capitalism.³⁶ Constructing itself as a trading community with cosmopolitan interactions reaching back centuries (while, in reality, consisting of a rela-

³⁵ Renan, 1990: 11.

³⁶ Duara already observes this about nationalism more broadly; cf. Duara, 2004: 29–34.

tively recent (con)federal state) may be seen as particularly affected by these strains between the local/tribal, the national/federal, and the global. The present research demonstrates how the nation brand project crystalises and amplifies the official narrative, while adding to it an aesthetic dimension. While deeply entrenched differences persist and not all political decisions are popular, it also suggests that most Emiratis are persuaded by the government discourse on the nation.

Bibliography

- Aamir, Moh[ame]d, and Nour Salman. "Voting Starts to Select New Logo to Represent the UAE to World." *Emirates News Agency* 1 December 2019. <https://www.wam.ae/en/details/1395302810921>. Accessed 1 July 2021.
- Al Maktoum, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid. *Twitter Account*. <https://twitter.com/HHShkMohd>. Accessed 1 July 2021.
- Al Nahyan, Mohamed bin Zayed. *Twitter Account*. <https://twitter.com/MohamedBinZayed>. Accessed 1 July 2021.
- Alexander, Kristian, and Leonardo Jacopo Maria Mazucco. "Beyond the Bedouin Path: The Evolution of Emirati National Identity." *Middle East Institute* (blog) 1 December 2021. Washington, DC. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/beyond-bedouin-path-evolution-emirati-national-identity>. Accessed 24 December 2021.
- Bristol-Rhys, Jane. "Emirati Historical Narratives." *History and Anthropology* 20.2 (2009): 107–121.
- Browning, Christopher S., and Antonio Ferraz de Oliveira. "Introduction: Nation Branding and Competitive Identity in World Politics." *Geopolitics* 22.3 (2017): 481–501.
- Cooke, Miriam. *Tribal Modern: Branding New Nations in the Arab Gulf*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014.
- Cornelissen, Scarlett. "National Meaning-Making in Complex Societies: Political Legitimation and Branding Dynamics in Post-Apartheid South Africa." *Geopolitics* 22.3 (2017): 525–548.
- Dinnie, Keith. *Nation Branding: Concepts, Issues, Practice*. Burlington: Elsevier, 2007.
- Duara, Prasenjit. *Sovereignty and Authenticity: Manchukuo and the East Asian Modern*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004.
- Essaidi, Zara. "Choose the New UAE Logo." *Design Home* (2012). <http://www.designhome.ae/choose-the-new-uae-logo/>. Accessed 1 July 2021.
- Hoeft, Rosemarijn, and Wouter Veenendaal. "The Challenges of Nation-Building and Nation Branding in Multi-Ethnic Suriname." *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 25.2 (2019): 173–190.
- Hughes, Michael. "UAE Nation Brand: How Much Public Involvement is too Much?" *Truly Deeply* (2012). <https://www.trulydeeply.com.au/2012/07/uae-nation-brand-how-much-public-involvement-is-too-much/>. Accessed 1 July 2021 (link expired).
- Kaneva, Nadia. "Nation Branding: Toward an Agenda for Critical Research." *International Journal of Communication* 5 (2011): 117–141.
- Khalaf, Sulayman. "Poetics and Politics of Newly Invented Traditions in the Gulf: Camel Racing in the United Arab Emirates." *Ethnology* 39.3 (2000): 243–261.
- Khaleej Times. "How UAE Leaders Reacted to Brand Logo Selection." 8 January 2020. <https://www.khaleejtimes.com/news/general/how-uae-leaders-reacted-to-brand-logo-selection>. Accessed 1 July 2021.

- Khaleej Times. "UAE Nation Brand Logo to Hitch a Ride on Mars Hope Probe." 19 January 2020. <https://www.khaleejtimes.com/government/uae-nation-brand-logo-to-hitch-a-ride-on-mars-hope-probe>. Accessed 25 July 2023.
- Ledstrup, Martin. *Nationalism and Nationhood in the United Arab Emirates*. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019.
- Moshashai, Daniel. "National Visions as Instruments of Soft-Power in the Gulf Region: The Case of the UAE and Its 'Vision 2021.'" Master's thesis, Master of Advanced International Affairs, Johns Hopkins, School of Advanced International Studies, Bologna, 2018.
- nationbranduae. "Tammāt al-muhima bi-najāḥ: Wuṣūl misbār al-amal ilā al-mirrikh ya'kis šūrat al-imārāt al-ḥaqīqiyya lil-'ālam wa-masīrat khamsīn 'āman min al-ṭumūḥ wal-iṣrār wal-najāḥ." [Mission Accomplished: The Arrival of the Hope Probe to Mars Reflects the True Image of the Emirates to the World and the Fifty-year March of Ambition, Determination, and Success.] *Instagram* 10 February 2021. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CLHiwOeH2Tk/>. Accessed 1 July 2021.
- Renan, Ernest. "What Is a Nation?" In *Nation and Narration*, edited by Homi K. Bhabha, 8–22. London: Routledge, 1990.
- Salim, Sahim. "Have your Say in Conveying UAE's Story to the World." *Khaleej Times* 18 December 2019. <https://www.khaleejtimes.com/news/general/have-your-say-in-conveying-uaes-story-to-the-world->. Accessed 1 July 2021.
- The National. "1.5 million Votes Cast in Search for UAE Brand Logo: One of Three Logos Will Be Chosen to Represent the Emirates to the Rest of the World." 21 December 2019. <https://www.thenationalnews.com/uae/1-5-million-votes-cast-in-search-for-uae-brand-logo-1.954497>. Accessed 1 July 2021.
- The United Arab Emirates Nation Brand. *Facebook*. <https://www.facebook.com/NationbrandUAE>. Accessed 1 July 2021.
- UAE Ministry of Cabinet Affairs. *UAE Vision 2021*. 2010. https://www.vision2021.ae/docs/default-source/default-document-library/uae_vision-arabic.pdf. Accessed 1 July 2021.
- UAE Ministry of Presidential Affairs. "The Formation of the Federation." *Our Archives* (2018). <https://www.na.ae/en/archives/historicalperiods/union.aspx>. Accessed 1 July 2021.
- UAE Nation Brand. "Itlāq mubādara al-hawīyya al-ilāmiyya lil-imārāt" [Launching the Nation Brand Initiative of the Emirates]. *YouTube* 3 November 2019. <https://youtu.be/6vPRuSpCB7w>. Accessed 1 July 2021.
- UAE Nation Brand. *Instagram*. <https://www.instagram.com/nationbranduae/>. Accessed 1 July 2021a.
- UAE Nation Brand. "Media Kit." <https://www.nationbrand.ae/en/mediakit>. Accessed 1 July 2021b.
- UAE Nation Brand. *Twitter Account*. <https://twitter.com/theemirates>. Accessed 1 July 2021c.
- UAE Telecommunication Regulatory Authority. *Year of the 50th*. 2021. <https://u.ae/en/about-the-uae/the-uae-government/year-of-the-50th>. Accessed 1 July 2021.
- Volčič, Zala, and Mark Andrejevic. "Nation Branding in the Era of Commercial Nationalism." *International Journal of Communication* 5 (2011): 598–618.
- Zeineddine, Cornelia. "Nation Branding in the Middle East: United Arab Emirates (UAE) vs. Qatar." *Proceedings of the International Conference on Business Excellence* 11.1 (2017): 588–596.