

**SIS Spring 2008: Culture, Society and Identity in the Middle East**  
***Mondays, 2:10-4:50 pm***

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**Course Description**

This course will examine research on communal identity (e.g. tribal, ethnic, religious/sectarian and national) in order to provide a context for understanding political, economic and socio-cultural developments in the contemporary Middle East. Case studies include: Jordan, Egypt, Yemen, Morocco, Iraq, Iran and the Arab Gulf states. From a post-modern perspective, we will be examining the "social construction of difference." Two images, the mosaic and the segmentary triangle have been used to represent the two most common approaches to the study of communal identity in the Middle East through most of the 20th Century. Today, however, scholars view these models as inadequate because they conceptualized communal identity as something fixed or unchanging, as primordial, essentialist or even biologically determined. Current approaches to the study of the politics of identity recognize that communal identities are cultural phenomena, and as such they are imagined and negotiated in specific (and evolving) cultural, economic and political contexts. However, in terms strategies for the resolution of conflicts rooted in identity issues (e.g. ethnic or sectarian based conflicts), it is important to understand that in certain contexts communal groups will assert that their cultural identities are primordial and even biologically determined.

What are the ramifications of this understanding of communal identity for multi ethnic and multi sectarian states like Iraq, for example? Can national elites succeed in constructing and imposing a single 'national' identity (based on ethno-linguistic criteria) on multi ethnic and multi sectarian states like Iraq? Studies of expressive and communicative culture that shed light on relations of religion and politics, notions of community and authority and forms of speech and experience will be analyzed in class. We will explore these issues and others through readings, discussion and guest speaker presentations. The goal of this course is to introduce perspectives and research rooted in recent social and cultural theory that will assist students to become more informed interpreters of analytical and descriptive generalizations about 'identity' in the Middle East. Several films will be viewed throughout the course of the semester.

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## **Required Reading (available at the AU Bookstore):**

### **First Essay (due Monday, February 18th)**

Eickelman, Christine, 1984. *Women and Community in Oman*. New York University Press.

Meneley, Ann, 1996. *Tournaments of Value*. University of Toronto.

Rabinow, Paul, 1977. *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco*. University of California Press.

### **Second Essay (due Monday, March 24)**

Abu-Lughod, Lila. 1986. *Veiled Sentiments*. University of California Press.

Caton, Steven, 1994. *Peaks of Yemen I Summon: Poetry as Cultural Practice*. University of California Press.

### **Third Essay (due Monday, April 21)**

Layne, Linda, 1994. *Home and Homeland*. Princeton University Press.

Rosen, Lawrence, 1984. *Bargaining for Reality*. University of Chicago Press.

## **Course Requirements:**

- (1) Three short essays based upon the required readings (Eickelman, Meneley and Rabinow, Abu-Lughod and Caton, and Layne and Rosen) of no more than 15 double-spaced pages each. Essays will be due on the assigned date with no exceptions other than a written medical excuse. Essays will be marked down half a grade for each day they are late. Together, the three essays represent 50% of your grade.
- (2) Oral group reports. Students will be assigned to their groups before spring break. In consultation with me, groups will select a country or topic (e.g. 'Ethnic and tribal minorities in the Islamic Republic of Iran: Threat to the Regime?') and prepare an oral presentation with annotated bibliography. Groups will present during the final class session. Oral reports represent 40% of your grade.
- (3) Readings will be assigned in class (separate from the required reading for the essays). The purpose is to build on the concepts introduced in class and explored in the required readings for the three essays. 10% of your grade will be based on class discussions of the assigned reading materials, as well as the ethnographies you will read for your essays.

## **Topics to be covered in class:**

\*\*Basic concepts in social science theory and methodology (culture, structure and agency)  
The culture concept; social organization and institutions; agency (the role of the individual);

\*\*Insider (emic) vs. Outsider (etic) point of view (perspectives on research methods);

\*\*Constructing, negotiating and challenging communal identities in the Middle East  
(understanding socio-cultural identity as constructed meaning);

\*\*What is a tribe?

Constructing tribal identities, settings of tribalism; tribe-state dynamics in historical context;

\*\*Nationalism, nation-states and states without nations.

### **Week 1 and 2 (note: there is NO CLASS on January 21)**

Introduction to the Middle East: What is the Middle East and how do we objectify it for analysis?

Introduction to Social Science Theory and Methodology: Culture, Structure, Agency  
The Culture Concept (*Kulturbrille*), Social Organization and Institutions, Agency (the role of the individual); A paradox: culture and society shape and, at the same time, are shaped by, the individual

FILM --“Shahrbano” (2002) 57 minutes, Library Lower Level Media Classroom (a meditation on encountering “the other”)

Assigned Reading: Clifford Geertz, Chapter 3, “From the Native’s Point of View,” in *Local Knowledge*; David Fromkin, “Introduction,” in *A Peace to End all Peace*; Edmund Burke, *Struggle and Survival in the Modern Middle East* (1993), read Chapter 1.

### **Week 3 and 4**

Introduction to a key concept in contemporary Social Science: Emic vs. Etic approaches to understanding social and cultural processes in a given society. The Emic approach represents the “native’s” point of view (from inside the system) -- culture as pattern; The Etic approach represents the “outsider’s” point of view (from outside the system) - culture as process.

Village and Community: Case Study: Emrys Peter’s study of rank and status in a Lebanese village. Finding: both emic and etic approaches are necessary to understanding the politics of identity in the Middle East.

Discussion of Readings for first essay

### **Week 5 (first essay due)**

Pastoral Nomadism

Film: *Grass* (all films will be viewed in the Media Center, Library, Lower Level)

Assigned Reading: Donald Cole, *Nomads of the Nomads*, chapters 1, 3, 4, 5, and 7.

### **Week 6**

Personal and Family Relations

Film: *Divorce Iranian Style*

Assigned Reading: Dale Eickelman and James Piscatori, Chapter 4 “The Firmest Tie and Ties that Bind: The Politics of Family and Ethnicity,” in *Muslim Politics* (1996).

### **Week 7**

Constructing, Negotiating and Contesting Communal Identities in the Middle East. Communal identities refer to group identities defined on the basis of ethnicity, religion/sect, tribe, clan and national or citizenship identity. This session will open our discussion of how Western social scientists have attempted to understand the dynamics of communal identity formation, maintenance and change in the Middle East.

Assigned Reading: Assigned Readings: Khoury and Kostiner, *Tribes and State Formation in the Middle East* (1990) Part 1, Chapter by Richard Tapper; Lila Abu Lughod, *Writing Women's Worlds* (1993), Chapter 5, "Honor and Shame."

### **NO CLASS ON MONDAY MARCH 10 –SPRING BREAK**

### **Week 8**

Film on Afghan Warlords and discussion of books for second essay

### **Weeks 9 (second essay due) and 10**

Tribal, Ethnic and National Identities in the Middle East

Tribalism: Diversity (villages, towns and cities; pastoral nomads, farmers, businessmen and government officials); Arab tribal formations vs. Iranian/Turkic tribal formations (scale, hierarchy and social organization).

Assigned Readings: In Edmund Burke, *Struggle and Survival in the Modern Middle East* (1993), Chapter 9 (Bibi Maryam), Chapter 18 (Migdim), Chapter 20 (Rostam).

Film on Shi'ism

### **Week 11**

Tribalism continued

FILM (Gabbah)

### **Week 12**

Discussion of readings for third essay (no assigned readings)

### **Week 13**

Ethnicity, Ethnic Groups, Peoples, Nations and Nationalism: Origins and spread of nationalism; what is a nation-state? What is a non nation-state? What is an ethnic group vs. a national group or 'nation'?

Assigned Readings: Martha Cottam and Richard Cottam, *Nationalism and Politics* (2001), Chapter 1, "Introduction," Chapter 2, "Nation States," Chapter 7, "Non-Nation States,"

### **Week 14**

Final Group Projects

Note: syllabus subject to change (e.g. guest speaker, new film, etc.)