

“Doing Market” Across National and Gender Divides: Consumption Patterns of Israeli Palestinians

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This chapter documents practices of consumption among Palestinian citizens of Israel from a variety of communities.¹ In Israel, and particularly among the Palestinian minority inside it, the massive influx of consumer goods and the burgeoning consumer culture that has surrounded them are relatively recent phenomena.² They are direct consequences of globalization, the rise in national wealth,³ the spread of multinational commerce, and the significant cheapening of goods that were formerly beyond the reach of the masses. Among the Palestinian citizens of Israel mass consumption is even more recent, expanding rapidly mainly in the last decade of the twentieth century.

A salient characteristic of Israeli-Palestinian consumption is that it extends across a range of markets, which are located within the state and beyond, and which offer varied types of goods, price levels, and interactions.⁴ To some degree, nearly all households combine purchases from different markets, sorting them according to a host of considerations such as cost, luxuriousness, convenience, satisfaction, or accessibility. This daily exercise of getting and assessing the value of goods attainable from different locations involves potential and actual crossing of gender, ethnic, and national borders. It vividly embeds consumerism in concentric circles of power, and induces consumers to position themselves actively, though not necessarily consciously, with respect to these powers.

Like older forms of exchange, consumption by Israeli Palestinians constitutes a token of social relationships (Douglas 1996; Miller 1995), and through them allows articulations of personal and collective identities (Friedman 1994; Halter 2000).

At the particular historical moment that this chapter records, Israeli Palestinians faced simultaneous openings of multiple borders: ethnic, national, regional, and cultural. These openings coincided with a booming economy of mass consumption, into which they were drawn along with the rest of the Israelis. Having relatively easy access to both Israeli-Jewish and non-Israeli Arab localities, they utilized the

openings of regional and national borders to diversify their material and cultural consumption. Like ethnic populations elsewhere in the world, who reside on opposite sides of national borders and are consequently frequent crossers of these borders,⁵ Israeli-Palestinian consumers could thus save or spend, adjusting their budgets and their social statements according to changing ability, accessibility, context, and need. In the process they have negotiated their position vis-à-vis the different reference groups that inhabit their lives. For Israeli Palestinians, shopping in the Palestinian Authority (PA), Egypt, or Jordan yields more than an opportunity for cheap material consumption. Likewise, Israeli shopping centers offer them more than high-quality products. Rather, these very different shopping environments furnish them opportunities to participate in the various cultural settings that comprise their social world.

A second prominent theme that emerges in Israeli-Palestinian practices of consumption, alongside frequent crossing of physical boundaries, is experimentation with cultural boundaries, most notably those of gender. In the fast-emerging consumer culture among Israeli Palestinians, gender symbolism is especially prominent because the moral discourse of authenticity usually lumps together mass consumption and women's liberation as the major causes of Westernization.⁶ This moral interpretation, moreover, is reinforced by the historical coincidence of the advent of mass consumption on the one hand and the expanding economic, educational, and civic opportunities for women on the other. Patterns of consumption tend partly to reaffirm traditional gender roles, but they also represent innovation with regard to the gender division of labor and notions of manhood and womanhood. Since many consumption practices involve new goods and resources, their gender classification is not obvious. Therefore, consumerism often yields opportunities to experiment with gender identities.

As in the case of doing market across geopolitical boundaries, the experimentation with gender through consumption has implications beyond personal matters. In this respect too, consumption constitutes an avenue through which the community molds its collective identity. Consumption has become a major vehicle for the production of modern men and women (see Abaza 2001; Abu-Lughod 1995; Forte 2002) who in turn serve as major embodiments of the modernity, and of the morality of their community.

The Consuming Community

In the 1990s, the years in which I did my research, the life of the Palestinian citizens of Israel seemed to evince improvement. After decades of political acquiescence they started to gain some prominence on the state's parliamentary scene. Their freedom of movement increased significantly compared with that in the first

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two decades of Israeli statehood, when they lived under military government. Their public discourse vis-à-vis Israeli-Jewish society has become sophisticated, demanding the civil rights that were theirs according to the state's liberal-democratic ethos. A new generation of intellectuals, who were still denied access to employment in the public sector, turned instead to establish numerous non-governmental organizations (Ittijah 1998), through which they managed to raise funds and produce community services that the state had neglected to offer. Economically, the majority of this population still occupied the lowest echelons of the Israeli class system both as individual households and as communities (Israel 2000; Kraus and Yonay 2000; Swirski and Conur 2000). Nevertheless, they became increasingly able to afford a variety of consumer goods – including cars, electronic appliances, and leisure activities, which only a decade before would have been very far from the reach of most. In this atmosphere of rising civil and political salience, and improved personal welfare, the Palestinian citizens seemed to have acquired a sense of confidence, which fed back into already existing ideas of individualism, personal freedom, and open opportunities, and through them to a general collective image of modernity.

However in 2002, when this chapter was being written, this sense of expanding possibilities was less strong, and at times seemed to be actually regressing. Amid world-wide economic recession and two years of political tensions with the PA, Israel experienced a deepening economic depression that had a particularly acute effect on the poorer segments of its population, including the Palestinian citizens. Rising nationalism reframed the latter as a potential fifth column and eroded the legitimacy of their claims for liberal rights. The most stark instance of this turn of events took place in October 2000, when political protest of Palestinian citizens instigated a violent police crackdown. In the following two years, escalating violent clashes between Israel and the PA brought about increasing restrictions on the passage of people and goods across the borders. Consequently, the movement of Israeli Palestinians into Arab localities outside the state became ever more difficult or even ceased altogether. Moreover, owing to intensifying public hostility toward Arabs, their movement in and out of Jewish localities too lost much of the ease it had acquired over the previous decade or two.

Since an acute state of war exists at the time of writing, it is difficult to predict whether the recent decline in consumption among Israeli Palestinians, both in expenditure and in spatial range, will mark a new phase or whether the wide array of consumption activities evident in the 1990s will be restored. Whatever direction it may take in the future, such periodical turns of events do not render obsolete the symbolism outlined below that I have discerned in the practices of consumption. Rather, they highlight how much symbolic meaning-making is embedded in history and at particular economic and political junctures. As I hope to show in this chapter, the theme of modernity that features very highly in the local discourse about consumption, including the seemingly apolitical notions of individualism

and materialism, is strongly ingrained in the political-economic conditions of the community. While the latter do not always come up explicitly in the context of consumption, they still figure very clearly in the symbolic texts that it produces.

In the 1990s then, and to some degree already in the 1980s, Israeli-Palestinians were assimilated into a fast-increasing national and global consumerism. For them as for people the world over, this created a certain atmosphere of democratization,⁷ as a wide variety of consumer goods and practices that had been too expensive and therefore served as class markers became readily available for the masses. Nevertheless, the intensity and scope of Israeli-Palestinian consumption is not uniform, as they are not a homogeneous population. Christians generally tend to have smaller families, higher levels of education, and higher occupational prestige than Muslims (Kraus and Yonay 2000), three parameters that influence household economies, including consumption. Likewise, urban communities tend to have higher rates of female labor-force participation, which again affects family-income levels and the scope of household consumption. For the purpose of the present chapter it is also important to mention the economic disparities between Palestinians in Israel and in the PA, which as we shall see have clearly affected the patterns of consumption of the former.

Israel is a rich country with a relatively high standard of living. For example, in 1998 the GDP in Israel was \$16,754, compared with \$1,322 in the neighboring Arab countries (and \$22,184 in the EU) (Swirski and Conur 2000: 5). This general affluence, although far from being equally divided – in fact, social inequalities in Israel have increased sharply – is intertwined with expanding consumerism. Matras Matras (2001: 13) identifies the intensification of consumer activities across the Israeli class system as social embourgeoisement, by which he means a general expansion of levels and qualities of consumption, increasing appreciation of the current and investment value of schooling and training, especially of post-secondary training, and a rising demand for leisure opportunities and pursuits. This phenomenon, he stresses, is present in all ethnic groups and has occurred despite widening income inequalities. Indeed it is remarkable that while by conventional measurements of social class the Palestinian citizens of Israel have always been classified in the lower-middle and poor strata of society,⁸ they too have nevertheless been increasingly drawn into the broader process of social embourgeoisement.

Going Out in Natania: Affording to Stop and Shop at Jewish Localities

Mūsa is a 42-year-old Christian. He is married, a city dweller, and a self-employed accountant. Here is his description of how he manages the economics of his domestic consumption:

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My gross income is about NIS 10,000 and I estimate that my wife's household expenses are about NIS 3,000. I give her small sums on an irregular basis, a few hundred here and a 50-shekel bill there, whenever she asks or even without her asking. I am her walking money machine. These sums are for food and household expenses and they do not include clothing and entertainment, for which I pay separately with checks or credit card. I separate personal expenses from household expenses. In fact, it would be cheaper for me to give her a set monthly salary [*sic*] of say NIS 1,200 and have her manage on that . . .

I really like going out. We go to restaurants and cafés here in town or in other cities, such as Tiberias, Natanya, or Tel Aviv [Jewish-populated cities]. We also go on week-long vacations to hotels in Israel or in other Mediterranean countries.

Mūsa, his 33-year-old wife Nawāl, and their only child live in an apartment building where his elderly parents and three married brothers also live, in separate apartments. The construction of this building was a shared enterprise between Mūsa's father and his sons. Today each nuclear family functions as an independent economic unit, although they still spend much time together on a daily basis, sharing meals and often going out to restaurants or on vacations. At work Mūsa is his own boss, running an independent firm of accounting and tax consultancy. He employs some of his relatives, namely his wife Nawāl as his unsalaried secretary and his sister-in-law and niece as salaried clerks. In the past one of his brothers worked for him for six years, as did his father for a short while after he retired.

Typical of family businesses, Nawāl's employment constitutes an expansion of her domestic work. She receives no independent income and her work is framed as "help." Mūsa remains the sole owner and manager of the family capital. Nawāl is given relatively little leverage with regard to spending money on consumer goods. While she is a regular participant in the consumption of goods and entertainment, and has a certain say as to what items she wants to buy, her consumption is largely mediated through a man. A wife's being given set sums of money for domestic and personal expenses, as in Nawāl's case, is a rather common practice. It applies not only to wives of business owners but also to women who are married to wage-earners. Many of these women do not participate in paid labor because they have small children at home, because there are no suitable jobs available for them, or because their husbands insist that they do not become employed.

In terms of class, Mūsa and Nawāl's is not a typical family. Rather, Mūsa being self-employed and his relatively high income place their circumstances well above those of the average Israeli Palestinian household.⁹ Throughout the 1990s, however, habits of going shopping in a mall, sitting in a restaurant, or even going on vacation at a hotel became increasingly popular and spread into more and more segments of the population, largely due to a diversification of sites and prices. Shopping centers, in particular, have turned into attractive recreational sites. Located at short driving distances from most Arab settlements, they appeal mostly

to adolescents and married and unmarried people in their twenties and thirties, and to a lesser degree also to people in their forties and fifties, who use them as sites for family excursions.

Hunting for Cheap Products in Expanding Territories: Israel, the West bank, Gaza, and Beyond

The bulk of daily purchases of most Israeli Palestinians, however, takes place elsewhere. Inside Israel, people buy mainly in open-air markets, wholesale stores, and local neighborhood stores, or from peddlers who visit their neighborhoods. Goods at these different markets themselves cover a wide price-range, and the lowest prices among them are significantly cheaper than those in the air-conditioned shopping centers. In all-Arab localities, such stores/markets serve locals of all income levels, including the better-off in the community. In mixed cities, such as Tel Aviv-Jaffa, Ramla, Lydda, or Haifa, cheap stores and open-air markets are usually located in the poorer areas, where families reside amid industrial workshops, garages, offices, and brothels, and their customers are poor people from diverse ethnic and national backgrounds.

Cheaper products still can be found across the borders in the PA and to a lesser degree also in Jordan and Egypt.¹⁰ Historically, the region now divided by national borders was one cultural domain, where communities maintained marriage relations, political alliances, businesses, and cultural exchange. These relations were abruptly severed following the creation of the state of Israel in 1948 and the sealing of the international borders between it and its Arab neighbors. Following the 1967 war and the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, much of the historical exchange between Palestinian communities on what had become opposite sides of the border was gradually restored.¹¹ After the peace agreements between Israel and Egypt in the early 1980s, and then Jordan in the mid-1990s, exchange relationships were established/renewed with other Palestinian and Arab communities.

In Arab stores inside Israel and in many of the Jewish-owned cheaper stores, much of the merchandize originates in the PA, where the merchants travel regularly to buy the goods. Transactions by Israelis across the borders are by no means unique to the Palestinian citizens of the state, but they are more common among them than among Jewish citizens in terms of scope, regularity, and directness.¹² Whereas Israeli Jews purchase from the PA territories mainly through mediators, for Israeli Palestinians direct contact is easy and even rewarding. Not only do they speak the language, many of them have relatives and friends in the West Bank and Gaza, with whom they already maintain an elaborate network of exchange. The relatively new phenomenon of large-scale movement of consumer goods between Palestinians from both sides of the border is therefore incorporated into an existing and active network of social relations.

Suha, a 25-year-old Muslim woman from an urban community in the center of Israel, has become highly skilled in making the best of cheap markets, tending to visit more and more of these as she became an adult. At 18, after she got engaged, Suha traveled alone to markets in Tel Aviv, Ramla, and Lydda (all inside Israel and less than an hour's drive from one another), to buy her dowry of bedclothes and home accessories. By the time I knew her, Suha, then a university student, was already a mother of a two-year-old. Like Nawāl, she lived with her husband Zeidān in a unit adjacent to his parents and married brothers, and since Zeidān was also still a student, they depended heavily on his father's financial support. This, in turn, was given within a strong patriarchal mode of relations, including ongoing attempts by Zeidān's mother to monitor her daughter-in-law. While she fiercely resisted her in-laws' attempts to control her, Suha did use their money – or, as she put it, her husband's money – to pay for tuition, for a car, and for driving lessons. Older and more confident that she had been when she first got engaged, she started using their car for shopping expeditions in towns in the West Bank, usually in the company of another woman or a child. On one occasion, for example, she invited an unmarried female neighbor to go with her to the West Bank city of Tūl Karem, where she took some of her gold jewelry to be repaired. During that one morning's trip the two women visited the jeweler and then dined at a restaurant before they drove back home.

Producing to Consume: Creating More Markets at Home

At the same time as they take their consumption activities farther away into old and new sites and territories, Israeli Palestinians are also creating new markets at home. At the core of this process lies a dynamic relation between consumption and production. Material goods for daily consumption, from food and clothes to dwellings and home appliances, are increasingly purchased rather than made or processed at home. Yet self-production of some of these goods for consumption or barter continues to exist on a small scale. For example, women buy bread but may also bake it at home; likewise cakes and other foods. Some women, especially in rural settlements, keep livestock, grow vegetables and fruits, or make clothes for their families; men build, renovate, and maintain the infrastructure of their own and their brothers' houses. Overall, the proportion of self-produced goods in the cycle of familial consumption is diminishing and that of ready-made ones is growing. But the possibility of reverting to self-production and self-service has not disappeared. The persistence of this option constitutes an important factor of consumerism, for it gives families leverage to cut down on household expenses according to changing needs. It also allows them to venture into business enterprises, mainly in the food, recreation, and gift industries, which in turn feed back into a growing cycle of consumption.

This connection is particularly prominent in the case of women, whose increasing and diversifying participation in consumption has been historically related to their changing participation in production, in that they have more cash to spend and they themselves produce new goods for other women to consume, mainly through their work in the informal sector.¹³ Muna, 40–odd, a Muslim, is a mother of six who resides in one of the villages of Galilee. Some years after her marriage Muna, who had only five years of formal schooling, decided that she needed to earn a living. She took a sewing course, bought a sewing machine, and started doing small mending jobs for her neighbors. Gradually she started sewing and selling new clothes too, and within a few years she managed to establish herself as a fashion designer specializing in wedding gowns and party dresses. Two years before I met her in 1998, Muna opened a store in the street-level room of her house, where she sells her dresses, lingerie, and accessories. The goods that she sells, as well as the material for the dresses, she buys on special trips that she makes to the city of Nazareth.

Muna, who is one of a relatively small group of women small-business entrepreneurs, affords an example of a cyclical link between women's production and consumption. Through her business Muna responds to an existing demand for women's luxury consumerism, but at the same time she contributes to nurturing and broadening this demand. Because she works from home, and because her business is largely informal, she is able to supply luxury clothes that are cheaper than those attainable outside the village. Also, her selling from home makes her merchandise attractive to village women, whose movements are restricted to walking distances and to domestic visits inside the village. Similar small businesses run by women and geared mostly to women consumers are home-based hairdressing salons, children's nurseries, fortune-telling, or handicrafts and home-made food. The success of all these relatively new business enterprises depends on the entrepreneurs' ability to convince their neighbors to purchase goods that were traditionally home-made. Such convincing, however, usually does not mean creating needs where none exist. Rather, it is a by-product of the broader mass-consumption that takes place outside the Palestinian enclaves, in which these women already participate on a small scale, but where costs are still too high to make them regular customers.

Going Out in Ramallah: Crossing the Border for Fun

An important and growing branch of consumerism that thrives on regional border crossing, besides the purchase of products and raw materials, is recreation and entertainment. Here are included short vacations in nearby Mediterranean and Arab countries or at hotels inside Israel, traveling to attend concerts by famous Arab musicians (mostly in Jordan or Egypt), and nightly recreational gatherings in

restaurants in the PA that offer food and live music (*sahrât* in Arabic). For large segments of the Israeli-Palestinian public, these forms of recreation have become financially and technically feasible only in recent years. This is a direct result of economic globalization, which has brought down the prices of flights and hotels and has produced an abundance of packages and group deals, as well as of the changing political conditions in the region. The Israeli peace agreements with Egypt and with Jordan yielded an abundant flow of Israeli tourists to these two countries, which owing to the significantly higher standard of living in Israel has been very much one-directional. Within this stream of tourists the Palestinian citizens are very prominent. Alongside the attraction of visiting countries that share their culture, language, and relations, the low costs incurred in visits to the neighboring states are an important factor enabling Israeli Palestinians to travel abroad for vacations.

Another, relatively small-scale branch of cross-border consumption is the pilgrimage to Mecca, which is officially sanctioned by the state of Israel for its Muslim citizens. Local Palestinians travel to Saudi Arabia in chartered buses, and during their short stay in the holy city they pay for accommodation and for the rituals. These include the purchase of a sacrificial lamb, and sometimes also of additional lambs on behalf of relatives and neighbors at home, who entrust them with this mission. The returning pilgrims usually take back small gifts, such as colorful clothes and beads or ritualistic items.¹⁴

The growing branch of leisure consumerism accords an interesting role to women as they, and not only men, engage in organizing trips and entertainment evenings. As mentioned, for most Israeli Palestinians, trips and vacations at hotels have become affordable only in the past decade or so. This mass influx of new clientele into the local and regional tourism industry created a plethora of small-scale entrepreneurships, in which Palestinian women enjoyed a relative advantage from the start. First, a (small) number of highly educated Palestinian women were already incorporated into tourist agencies in the Jewish sector, so that when the market ripened they became useful middle persons for these agencies, which wanted to draw in Arab customers. Alternatively, having acquired the skills and the connections, some of these women themselves took the initiative and started organizing private trips for groups of relatives and acquaintances. A second advantage for women lay in the norms of gender morality and gender segregation, which cast suspicion on women who traveled without their husbands. In light of these factors, women entrepreneurs began organizing trips and entertainment evenings for women only, marketing their personal good reputation as a guarantee of propriety. As in the case of Muna, the fashion designer, these women simultaneously responded to and created a demand in ever widening circles of low-income women, for whom until quite recently vacations and trips had never been an option.

Wafa is a 38-year-old divorced mother of four who lives in an urban community. Her income consists mostly of welfare benefits and some irregular alimony payments. For a period during our acquaintance, Wafa was engaged in organizing trips and entertainment evenings for people in her community. I first met her during a four-day organized women's trip to Jordan, which we both joined. During our stay, Wafa participated very little in the group's activities, and it was clear that she had independent local connections. (People she introduced as relatives would come to pick her up from the hotel.) Later I understood that she used this visit to establish business connections, for after we got back she started inviting people in the community to go on similar trips with her for cheaper prices. Beside the packages to Jordan, Wafa also organized several one-night outings (*sahrāt*) to restaurants in the West Bank city of Ramallah. Unlike the trips abroad, these *sahrāt* were gender-mixed, and as she invited certain unmarried individuals to participate, Wafa made a point of telling them that they would have an opportunity to meet available members of the other gender.

As a woman in the community commented to me, there was something peculiar, even uncanny, about Wafa's organizing this kind of activity because she was religious. Shortly after her divorce she had started wearing religious Muslim attire, which consisted of long-sleeved full-length dresses of opaque material and a headscarf. For Israeli Palestinian Muslims, entertainment evenings that include music and are attended by unrelated members of both genders are somewhat borderline situations. While many attend them gladly, as they would wedding celebrations, others, especially religious people, tend to avoid them, claiming that they harbor potential immorality. In fact, the case of Wafa's organizing *sahrāt* was doubly contradictory, because besides being religious she was also divorced. Divorced women are supposed to be particularly careful about attending secular entertainment events, let alone organizing them, for they are regarded as potential suspects of immoral behavior almost by definition. As it happened, Wafa's religious attire, which normally indicates overall religious observance, actually gave her a certain protection from such suspicions. The factor that should presumably have prevented her from engaging in the entertainment industry was what enabled her to do so. From an analytical point of view, Wafa's highly ambiguous involvement in entertainment consumerism is not surprising. It reflects the inevitable ambiguity that accompanies the parallel expansion of mass consumption on the one hand, and of gender categories on the other.

Women, in Particular

In the growing consumerism of Israeli Palestinians at the close of the twentieth century, women have been particularly prominent as consumption and women

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have become historically and discursively intertwined. Historically, the intensification of mass consumption has coincided with dramatic changes in women's social and economic opportunities. Women have entered the culture of mass consumption at the same time as they have started to gain visibility in the public sphere in other respects also. The relatively recent phenomenon of Israeli-Palestinian women driving, moving about on their own, running bureaucratic errands, or speaking on their own and their families' behalf, is closely related to their consumer participation in that it facilitates it and emanates from it. Women move about more freely when they drive their own cars, have cellular phones, and can use credit cards. These, along with their familiarity with the codes of consumer society, increase their independence and self-confidence. They encourage women to venture into ever-expanding territories, and this, in the end, enhances their participation in consumption even more. In response, local discourses on morality and modernity have assumed strong causal links between consumption and what people habitually call "the liberation of women."

In many of my formal interviews, especially those conducted with male notables such as sheiks, priests, or community leaders, consumer culture was popularly depicted as a source of collective malady, which entailed hyper-materialism and moral deterioration, by which most meant deterioration of gender morality. This verbal moralism was often a response to unarticulated messages that resonated in the conduct of many in the community, which connoted that consumerism was a sign of modernity and cultural sophistication. People extensively displayed consumer goods and skills, such as cars and driving licenses, cellular phones, fashionable dress, or recreational outings, to communicate cultural refinement and personal advancement.

A widespread local assumption, then, is that being part of modernity, consumption entails profound changes in gender relations. However, ethnographic documentation reveals that the transformations in gender relations often tend to be less striking than they appear. To a degree, mass consumption has followed and even strengthened the traditional gender patterns that assign large spending and purchasing away from home to senior family members, primarily men. Despite the short distances and generally smooth journey, and although increasing numbers of women drive cars, traveling across the border is still more legitimate for men than it is for women. For example, bulk purchases of fresh food (meat, vegetables, and fruit), which is significantly cheaper on the other side of the border, are more likely to fall to men. Men are also the ones who are more likely to buy expensive goods, such as jewelry, furniture, or construction materials. In many cases, when they wish to make such purchases, even women who have cars still ask their husband, brother, or son to take them.

Yet as we have seen ethnographically, this norm is flexible, even though it remains widespread. Suha, Muna, and Wafa, as well as 'Abla, whose example below will conclude this section, are in many senses exceptional individuals. These are women who dare to behave in ways that are not firmly within the consensus of gender morality. In the context of consumption, they not only act in an economically resourceful and entrepreneur-like way toward their family, which is fairly common behavior in women; they take their initiative on to the public sphere, and in the process they do not hesitate to cross borders, literally as well as metaphorically. While they are not necessarily representative, examples of such women are interesting here because they mark directions of change as well as the fluid boundaries of normative behavior. On the one hand, such women embody the idea that consumption and modernity indeed bring about revolutionary change in the status of women. Yet on the other hand, being exceptional they also denote the limits of such change, which in the experience of most women is much less radical.

When I tried to establish whether or not women going shopping in the PA on their own was considered normative behavior, the answers revealed that “the norm” was diverse and rather inclusive. Most women I spoke to said they did not feel safe or comfortable doing expensive purchases in the PA without the company of men. They would, however, happily join a female friend for half a day’s trip across the border in the latter’s car when the opportunity arose, and would come back with small bargains, such as toys or children’s clothes. It all depended on the family, people asserted, by which they meant the degree of each family’s conservatism (*tahaffut*). Indeed, different families within the same village, neighborhood, or clan (*hamūla*) may adhere to very different standards in this respect, some prohibiting their women from leaving the village or the neighborhood unescorted, others allowing them to travel alone to any destination inside and outside the country, and for any reason. Moreover, it is not uncommon to find different interpretations of normative feminine behavior even within the same household, where one sister may feel that she cannot allow herself to take the bus alone, say from Jaffa to Tel Aviv, while her sister readily drives herself all over the country, and stays overnight with relatives or friends (see Sa’ar 2000).

Aside from what local people call families’ conservatism, traveling alone to large shopping malls in Israel or to the PA depends also on whether or not a woman can drive; still more on whether she has her own car. It depends also on her age and family situation (for example, elderly women are less likely to travel alone; young unmarried women may not be allowed to travel for fear for their reputation), and on her lifestyle in general. Women who work outside the house or study in a different city are more accustomed to being out on their own. Their Hebrew is usually more fluent, they feel confident dealing with strangers and, if seen by a relative or a neighbor, are more likely to have a legitimate excuse for being out in the first place. Women who manage to appropriate the prerogative of independent

across-the-border consumerism usually are sustained by a combination of some basic material means, a social environment that is at least partly supportive, and most importantly, a very assertive personality.

For the majority of women who travel to the PA, Egypt, or Jordan, with male relatives or in groups of women, the borders still constitute a significant factor in the articulation of gender and consumption. Even so, the encounter of citizens and non-citizens in consumer transactions still gives these women some significant edge. This is particularly evident when they meet with salesmen and peddlers from the West Bank and Gaza *in their own neighborhoods*. The products that women can buy from these non-citizens are usually cheaper than what they can get in the local stores and markets, and this gives them a sense of power. Many women become exceptionally assertive in bargaining and take much pride in managing to bring the already low prices further down. Likewise, when displaying goods purchased across the border, women emphasize the good bargain they made, interspersing their discourse with paternalistic expressions of pity for the poverty-stricken people who sold it to them.¹⁵ Lastly, even when no physical or political borders are crossed, consumption still offers opportunities for bending and crossing the boundaries of gender morality. An obvious example in this respect is watching television, an item that is found in the vast majority of households, usually with a wide selection of satellite or cable channels. When they come across sexual or erotic scenes on television, some women switch to another channel in embarrassment, while others make a point of watching and even adding interpretations.

I conclude this section with a story of one last outstanding woman. 'Abla is a 33-year-old unmarried professional Muslim woman, a neighbor of Suha. In 1998 'Abla took over a small unit in a compound in which her extended family, namely parents, two married brothers, and two other unmarried sisters, had lived as protected tenants. That unit became vacant after one brother moved to an apartment he had newly purchased. While at once there were various contenders for the new space, 'Abla managed with her father's support to claim it for herself. She decided to renovate it, and hired one of her brothers-in-law to do the work. Most atypically she did not give this brother-in-law a lump sum to buy the necessary materials, but instead did all the purchasing herself. She would travel frequently to ʤul Karem to inspect the available merchandise, then to bargain, and finally to arrange for the transport of blocks, tiles, faucets, sinks, and such appliances. On these trips 'Abla, like Suha, would take a younger companion with her, usually a boy or an adolescent girl. However, she never took men and she did all the negotiating herself. Indeed, 'Abla told me that on these trips to ʤul Karem she soon became noticed and got many reactions of wonder and flirtatious behavior from local men. Apparently she handled these very skillfully, for she managed to complete all the transactions to her full satisfaction without ever being assaulted or

seriously harassed. Although she had given some of the merchants her private phone number for technical arrangements, none of them abused their possession of it to pursue her romantically.

'Abla is an exceptional individual in many respects. She herself said when I asked her about the trips to ʤul Karem: "I don't know anybody who does what I do." She is exceptional not only with regard to *where* she chose to buy, but also to *the kind of goods* she bought by herself. Normatively, Palestinian women do not undertake to renovate homes on their own, and when they do they tend to be content to choose a subcontractor, usually a relative, and let him go about the actual purchasing of materials. It is precisely because of her exceptionality that 'Abla constitutes a good example of the point at issue, which is that at the junction of three historically new roads – mass consumption, modernizing gender relations, and changing political borders – the practical meanings of gender and ethnicity/nationality are amenable to creative shaping.

Statements about Identity in the Discourse of Consumption

Anthropologically, the exchange of goods through consumerism can be seen as an exchange of images and meanings (Bourdieu 1984), and therefore as a form of discourse (Sahlins 1976: 286). Israeli-Palestinians use consumption to negotiate their position vis-à-vis Palestinians in the PA, other Arabs, Israeli Jews, and in a more generalized sense also "the modern world." The web of movements spun in this process produces a commentary on their relationships with these groups, hence a discourse on collective identity. Practices of consumption create "an unstable field of floating signifiers" (Baudrillard, in Featherstone 1987: 19), which unravels simultaneous possibilities of difference and sameness *within and without* the national collectivity. Thus, Israeli Palestinians approach material and more so cultural consumption in Arab localities outside Israel with a combination of romantic ardor and the relaxation of those who have returned home. This wishful position, however, is rendered significantly more complex by the fact that they come from and return to their actual homes inside Israel. In actuality, when Israeli Palestinians go for shopping, holidaying, or entertainment in the West Bank, Egypt, or Jordan they vacillate between two contradictory positions: of a deprived minority at long last reuniting with its native culture, and of privileged customers who stand to make a nice bargain.

The map of Israeli-Palestinian consumerism presents a particular construction and experience of space, which are different from the state's hegemonic construction. In certain important respects this is a subversive alternative space as it provides the Palestinian citizens with avenues for cheap consumption that are not available to the Israeli-Jewish public. More than that, through cultural exchange and collective

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communication with other Palestinians it provides them with avenues to evade the state's control and its attempts to isolate them. Yet despite its subversive potential, this alternative space is by no means protected from the forces and logic of national exclusion. For one thing, Palestinian citizens who cross the borders are periodically subjected to inspection, arrest, and related methods of control. A more subtle form still in which the hegemonic order penetrates the alternative space is the partial internalization of Israeli ethnocentrism, which the Palestinian citizens willy-nilly tend to adopt in their encounters with the poverty and less modern technology on the other side of the border.

Regardless of the explicit or conscious political identifications with which they approach their consumer transactions, the interchange of Israeli Palestinians with Israeli Jews and non-Israeli Arabs alike is invariably affected by their multiple affiliations. While at it, they shift among contradictory positions of affinity, strangeness, power, and disempowerment. Consumption-related interactions with other Arabs are informed by a conglomeration of cultural closeness and a sense of shared history, alongside the paternalism of those who live a more comfortable life. Likewise, their interactions with Israeli Jews are fashioned by a mixture of the affinity of co-consumers on the one hand and feelings of alienation and hostility on the other.

Consumption then, especially when it takes place on some Other's turf, provides daily opportunities to grapple with the meanings and implications of being Israeli Palestinians. In a similar vein and maybe even more intensely, it also creates opportunities to experiment with ways of being a man or a woman. These two issues are closely linked, because gender is a popular key symbol in articulations of collective identity and because in practical individual experiences, being a woman/man and being Palestinian (or Arab) are inextricably connected circumstances. The utilization of gender as a key symbol in representations of national and ethnic identity is well documented in the literature (see Haeri 1999; Katz 1996; Kelsky 1999; Peteet 1993, 1999). Especially popular in this respect is the role of gender as carrier of modernity and authenticity.¹⁶ For example, analyzing advertisement images in the Arabic press in Israel, Rekhess (1987) points out a conflict between what he calls "traditional" and "Western" influences. In all his examples the controversial images are always those of women who are either too exposed or too covered for the taste of the readers. He cites similar findings from a study conducted in the Arab Gulf states, according to which Arab consumers reacted negatively to the implantation of Western images and values, which again revolved around the representation of women's bodies.

For Israeli Palestinians, because of their multiple and conflicting affiliations, modernity represents many things at once. It stands for both the relatively advantageous and disadvantageous components of their existence. In respect of the Jewish majority inside the state, modernity represents a form of cultural takeover,

whereas in respect of non-citizen Palestinians and other Arabs it represents a form of cultural advancement. We could see an example of this duality in the case of Mūsa. His tight control of his wife's expenditures clearly reflected traditional masculine role definition. At the same time, his consumer choices, such as taking his wife out to have a good time or orienting her to run an up-to-date household, also suggested that he was re-creating himself as a *modern* man. Unlike verbal debates about identity,¹⁷ consumerism allows far more subtle negotiations of ideological constructs such as national authenticity and modern civility, because it translates them into a series of practical daily behaviors. The observations of such behaviors that were presented in this chapter have revealed continuity rather than a break between the various moral codes and identity components of the group in question.

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