

R e v i e w s

Baird, Ileana, and Hülya Yağcıoğlu, eds. 2021. *All Things Arabia: Arabian Identity and Material Culture*. Arts and Archaeology of the Islamic World 16. Leiden and Boston: Brill. 269 pp. ISBN 978-90-04-43591-9.

This is a much valuable collection of essays and articles grounded more or less explicitly in the interconnected theories and research concepts called *thing theory*, *new materialism*, *material culture studies* and *memory studies*. All of them are part of the broader postconstructionist paradigm change in the humanities which looks on human-object relations in daily life, in literature and in culture in an innovative way that allows to perceive objects and things not as being simply inanimate or lacking agency, but as part of a dialogue between thing-in-itself and thing-as-used (and also thing-as-remembered) on the one hand, and a part of a dynamic human-thing interactions on the other. Those studies emphasise the role of the material objects, as well as human and animal bodies in their social and cultural interactions.

The mere objects around us turn into ‘things’ because of their cultural significance without which they are voiceless. In this sense the ‘things’ speak, and they also speak to us in this book which comprises a vast spectrum of objects and artefacts, from cultural objects and commodities through historical and ethnographic artifacts to imaginary things. They played various cultural roles and functions both in the material history of the Peninsula as well as in the Western world where they became part of the Orientalised imagination.

The book contains 12 articles and is provided with Introduction (Ileana Baird), Afterword (Hülya Yağcıoğlu) and a useful index of names, places, subjects and terminology. One of its great assets are several dozens of illustrations (photos,



graphics, paintings and maps) that exemplify and clarify the discussed topics. Worth noting is the valuable selection of contributors hailing from different countries and representing a variety of academic institutions and research disciplines that range from language and literature, through ethnography, history, cultural anthropology, to visual arts and digital humanities. This makes the collection of essays, as one of the editors Ileana Baird points out, 'both interdisciplinary and cross-historical, involving the combined experience of scholars from diverse fields of study' (p. 19).

In the first part 'Arabia of the Old: The Things of the Trade' we find articles about the most precious and desirable commodities that made the Arab Peninsula, first and foremost *Arabia Felix*, famous: frankincense and incense as well as utensils used for burning them (William Gerard Zimmerle), pearls extracted from the molluscs living in the waters of the Persian Gulf (Victoria Penziner Hightower) and palm dates, mostly from the gardens of southern Iraq (Eran Segal). The second part 'Imagining Arabia: Exotic, Fabulous, and Misplaced Things' concentrates on the imaginative power of things from Arabia and on stereotypes about them circulating in the West. It brings together theoretical and historical reflections about the origins and perseverance of those stereotypes (Ileana Baird) with more factual ones about imaginary things like the Aladdin's Wonderful Lamp (Jennie MacDonald) and creative maps ranging from the real Arabian Desert to the imaginative so-called Garden of Allah with its constitutive elements: the sand, the oasis and the mosque (Holly Edwards). The third part 'Emblems of Arabia: Things as Identity Markers' deals with more psychological and sociological questions of mutual interconnections between things, memory, revival and identity. The first article in this part discusses the traditional falconry among Bedouins and among the contemporary wealthy class in the United Arab Emirates (Yannis Hadjinicolaou), the second one examines the cultural significance of the so called *al-Sadu* weavings (Rana Al-Ogayyel and Ceyda Oskay), and the third one brings reflections about head coverings, primarily the *keffiyeh*, as a means of creating both national and political identity (Joseph Donica). The fourth and last part 'Post-Oil Arabia: Things, Memory, and Local Identity' focuses on more contemporary things and objects: protective medallions produced in Oman (James Redman), various sorts of jewellery (Marie-Claire Bakker and Kara McKeown), and the role the 'cine-things', as the author calls them, play in the Emirati cinema, exemplified mainly by the film *Hamama* by Nojoom Alghanem (Chrysavgi Papagianni).

The great value of the book lies in its detailed descriptions of the material culture of the Arab Peninsula and in elucidations of the interwoven relations between the ethnographic reality and the Western representations of this reality. It proves that the contribution of Arabic culture to the global heritage is still of great importance and that it goes far beyond traditional Orientalists' narratives about the opulence of the Orient. Apart from the well-known 'things' like frankincense and incense, jewellery or customs like falconry, it sheds new light on

the richness of the Bedouin culture that brought about metalwork, earthenware, wood-carved objects, crafting tools, garments, ornaments, ritual objects, and other sorts of nonrepresentational art.

I found it particularly beneficial to discover unique names of different things (e.g. *huyul bu showq* or *banjeri* for a spikey bangle), and to learn more about little known facts, for instance, about palm dates (did you know that there are more than six hundred varieties of palm dates in Iraq?), their harvesting, keeping and utilisation in cultural ceremonies (e.g. 'rubbing a boy's palate with dates after his birth as a way of curbing his natural desires and as a symbol of his acceptance within the community', p. 56). Things like the traditional Bedouin *al-Sadu* weavings, although widespread across the Middle East, remain mostly unknown as to how they were, and to some extents still are, produced. Most of us have seen the ground looms used to weave, but probably not the gazelle horn (unfortunately no name for it provided) that is used to divide the threads as the warp is picked up according to the woven pattern (p. 150). Little is also known about the Omani silver medallions called *kirsh kitab* that were designed originally for women to wear them around the neck with the purpose of protection. They were or are provided either with the Quranic verses or with certain graphic symbols representing for instance the *jiniyya* Umm al-Subyan, a horrifying female demon who haunts young children and babies (p. 181). Likewise, very informative are all passages dealing with clothing, jewellery and various fashion items, which we see here through the lens of new materialism and their identity-creating potential. This potential extends from individual and group identity to politicised spheres. The *hijab*, for example, can be worn as a simple head covering, an expression of personal preferences, or it can function as a cultural or religious symbol embracing Islamic and/or Arab identity, whereas the *keffiyeh* can gain either a national or a broader political status. Here we can also see the entanglements of the material culture of the Arabs and its Orientalists' projection, since the typical Arabic garments and head coverings have always been used in the Western visual arts, both in positive as well as negative ways, to portray and identify characters as Arabs or Muslims. And since *keffiyeh* has become a powerful symbol of free Palestine in the last decades, it has also been worn by political activists in the West to signal their commitment to the Palestinian cause. However, what was not so long ago a simple matter of political opinion or attitude, nowadays has become a rather controversial predicament because of the so-called cultural appropriation, i.e. the use of another culture's religious or cultural symbols in a stereotypical way (pp. 163ff).

Contrary to some common beliefs about the civilisational stagnation of life in the desert, the book testifies to its vitality and ability to evolve in time. It also shows how Arabic culture interacts with the influences of contemporary Western material culture. This is particularly noticeable in the field of the visual arts, for instance in the work of the most acclaimed Emirati female director, Nojoom

Alghanem. Although sometimes, as Chrysavgi Papagianni in her article about the director bemoans (pp. 213ff), the life in the Emirates is dominated by the overwhelming forces of globalisation and, paradoxically, by the borrowed Orientalists' attitudes, the case of Alghanem proves that the traditional culture is able to redefine the Emirati identity.

All Things Arabia broadens our knowledge about the significance of Arabic culture. It dispels different stereotypes and stimulates new thinking about its complex heritage. It is a praiseworthy book, especially with regard to the thoroughness with which it tackles the material foundations of the Arabic culture, but also because of the richness and variety of discussed facets and contexts. Even if the promising title *All Things Arabia* leaves the reader unsatisfied with the necessary exclusion of so many other things that are still waiting to be described and analysed. One cannot of course include 'all things' in a single volume, therefore it would be very much desirable to continue the undertaken task and to prepare a next volume, which could—here's my humble suggestion—take into consideration object from the environment like sand and water (both in their practical and symbolic use, e.g. as means of ablution), household utensils, things used to deal with animals but also having ritual applications (e.g. saddles used in prayer as *sutras*) or, last but not least, the cold steel that is used, apart from the obvious practical applications, in various linguistic, literary and ritual contexts (e.g. as an indispensable accessory in ceremonial sabre and stick dances that are common to the people of the Peninsula).

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