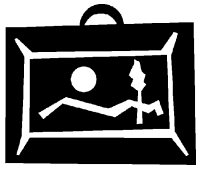
QUICK STUDIES



AS YOU SEE IT

Middle Eastern Americana: Beyond Orientalism

JONATHAN FRIEDLANDER
Center for Near Eastern Studies, UCLA International Institute, University of California, Los Angeles, Los Angeles, Calif.;
e-mail: jfriedlander@international.ucla.edu
doi:10.1017/S0020743809091077



Thoth Krewe Parade, New Orleans, Louisiana, 3 February 2008. Photo by the author. [A color version of this figure can be viewed online at journals.cambridge.org/mes]

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743809091077 Published online by Cambridge University Press

From a float decorated as their ibis-headed Egyptian namesake, tarboosh-topped members of the Krewe of Thoth toss trinkets to happy throngs along St. Charles Avenue in New Orleans. The occasion is Mardi Gras—not a day but a season in this legendary American city. Along with Thoth parade the krewes (social clubs) of Babylon, Isis, and Cleopatra, among others, the last group winding through Algiers, the second-oldest neighborhood in New Orleans, on the west bank of the Mississippi across from the French Quarter.

Middle Eastern themes ripple and eddy through this river city's multicultural mélange. Since the inception of Mardi Gras in the mid-19th century, a dozen dazzling Middle Eastern-esque parade krewes have annually celebrated their monikers, including the now defunct Aladdin, Sinbad, Mecca, Arabi, Thebes, Osiris, Moslem, Alhambra, Samson and Delilah, Priests of Mithras, Caliphs of Cairo, Prophets of Persia, and numerous other associations that found aspects of the Middle East to be representative of their core values and worthy cultural signatures.

I have been photographing Middle Eastern theme parades for more than a decade. In Opa-Locka, Florida, just down the road from Miami, I have captured on film the Heritage of the Moors parade in the Arabian Nights Festival, which celebrates the 1926 founding of this "Bagdad of the South," an "Arabian fantasy" community with one of the largest collections of Moorish architecture in the Western Hemisphere.[1] In Indio, California, I shot the National Date Festival with its annual Queen Scheherazade scholarship pageant and parade. It commemorates the transplantation of Algerian date palms to the southern California desert in 1903. Within decades, bountiful palms were yielding a lucrative crop, and today the Coachella Valley produces about 95 percent of U.S.-grown dates from the Barhi, Dayri, Halawy, Khisab, Medjool, Thoory, and Zahidi varieties to Deglet Noor, *diqla nūr*, the popular "dates of light."[2]

Mardi Gras season in New Orleans provides a stage where orientalism is showcased in grand style. Beyond their distinctive roots, all of the Middle Eastern parades embody typically American conventions as well: color guards and mounted police, fire engines and marching bands, local politicians, dignitaries, clowns, Shriners (in fezzes!) buzzing around in minicars, and, of course, floats. In the case of Thoth (named for the Egyptian deity of wisdom), a flotilla of 40 floats carries 1,200 riders, including krewe royalty, officials, and throwers. The krewe embraces a tradition of philanthropy and civic duty and expresses its creativity and artistry through themes ranging from "Mythological Divinities & Demigods," the subject of the first Thoth parade in 1948, to "We the People" in 2007.[3]

The Thoth parade signifies the historic infusion of the Middle East in American popular culture. Beyond the obviously stereotypical and racy representations it and other parades may espouse, the Middle Eastern tradition in Mardi Gras has been appropriated and entered the realms of Americana, along with a significant array of other activities, products, fashions, and lifestyles. Consider Middle Eastern iconography and its continuing impact on the lucrative

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743809091077 Published online by Cambridge University Press

sale of tobacco and coffee over the course of the 20th century and beyond. What about the proliferation of belly dancing; Moorish, Egyptian, and Assyrian architectural styles; Middle Eastern-theme films; music (folk, swing, jazz, fusion, rock, heavy metal, and hip hop); pulp-fiction thrillers and paperback romances; comics and graphic novels; and lately electronic games—all branded Made in America? By appropriating and culturally embracing the Middle Eastern Other, Americans have invariably affirmed it in the texture of everyday life and collective consciousness. So, in 1972, during one of the most turbulent decades of the women's movement in the United States, when the founders of the first all-female krewe sought an appropriate and defining symbol, it is neither surprising nor coincidental that they selected the powerful icon of Cleopatra to convey their mission and creed.

The number of studies dealing with orientalist representations in the United States is on the rise. Alas, only a few have attempted to move beyond the construct of American orientalism and explore this twisted cultural genre and phenomenon in the context of Americana and American cultural studies. Edward Said and his *Orientalism* launched an open-ended conversation, one that is evolving and now firmly rooted in the United States. As we ponder its contemporary nuances and implications, can those of us who are attuned to the orientalist discourse celebrate and enjoy the visual richness of Middle Eastern-ish Mardi Gras parades, as countless Americans have done for more than a century? The way I see it, *laissez les bon temps rouler!*

NOTES

[1]"History," City of Opa-Locka, Florida, http://www.opalockafl.gov/Home/AboutOpalocka/tabid/117/Default.aspx (accessed 23 January 2009).

[2]"History of the Riverside County Fair and National Date Festival," http://www.datefest.org/Portals/0/mediaKit/8%20-%20History%20of%20Fair.pdf (accessed 23 January 2009); "Agriculture: Rich Crop Diversity," VillageProfile.com, http://www.villageprofile.com/california/indio/indio18.html (accessed 23 January 2009).

[3]"History," Krewe of Thoth, http://www.thothkrewe.com/history.htm (accessed 23 January 2009).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743809091077 Published online by Cambridge University Press