

THE FUTURE IS EMERGING / OPINION

16 October 2013



Emerging market creativity is on the rise, explains John Grant, author of new book *Made With*

When a film-maker or novelist wants to evoke a near future society then mixing in other cultures and languages is a common trick. *Clockwork Orange* characters spoke 'nadsat', using Russian influences (nadsat means "-teen", as in thirteen). *Bladerunner* featured 'cityspeak', a mash-up of "Japanese, Spanish, German, what have you" while other incidental characters spoke Korean. The choice of Russian (in the 1960s) or Japanese and Korean (in the 1980s) to signify the future was a sign of those works' times.

If you were writing those scenes today wouldn't you rather use Punjabi and Turkish, Portuguese and Indonesian... the voices and cultures of the emerging markets? Or maybe you'd just set it in Shanghai? Or Qatar? According to professional services company Ernst & Young, emerging markets' combined GDP may overtake the developed world in 2014. So these countries really are 'the new Japan' in challenging the American-Western hegemony.

In my new book *Made With* I set out to explore the world of emerging market brands. Would they be similar to Western brands, or somehow different? I concentrated on the Muslim majority world. This region appealed because it's less overdone in business media than China, India and Brazil. And it was topical (the Arab Spring was all over the news at the time). These countries are also amongst the fastest growing - the average GDP growth across the 57 Muslim majority countries being 6% a year, ie roughly doubling every decade. These are young populations (60% under 30 years old), with booming digital and smartphone usage. They are also hugely cultured, creative and compelling - as I already knew from my many dealings with Turkey. And there was the backdrop of Western Islamophobia that made it feel worthwhile to turn the spotlight away from conflict and onto creativity and entrepreneurship.

I'd started out with an assumption that these brands and innovators would represent an 'East' quite opposed to the West. But as I met cultural innovators in Istanbul, Amman, Jakarta and Beirut I learned that they rather saw themselves as bringing together the best of both East and West. Many had been educated or employed in Europe or America. They were comfortable with mixing influences; for instance Timur Savci bringing Western cinematography to Turkish history and archetypal stories - like his epic global TV hit *The Magnificent Century*. There is also, I learned, a subtlety to conversations and concepts in this region, favouring ambiguity rather than Anglo Saxon either/or distinctions.

My overall conclusion was that this region does create brands in a different mode than the West. Our brands are mainly about heroic personality. They are 'Made By', whether it is real founding personalities like **Coco Chanel** and **Steve Jobs**, or the brand supporting personalities from the Marlboro Cowboy to Nike athletes to the Red Bull stuntman.

The culture of the Muslim countries was traditionally opposed to such icons. You will find no statues, no portraits on public display, not even an artist's signature. This bias seems to live on, their modern brands being 'Made With' - concerned less with heroic personality

and instead with craft or invention, fusion and community.

For example **Fadi Ghandour**, founder of **Aramex** (the 'Fedex of the Middle East') and investor in Maktoob.com, talked to me about how the 'myth of the entrepreneur' was unhelpful. What was needed were skills, support and practical determination, not a heroic and overblown self-image. For most of his career (as the most famous entrepreneur in the Middle East) Ghandour had not thought of himself as an entrepreneur, but 'just a person trying to grow a business'. Ghandour went on on to found a scheme encouraging fellow business leaders to support, invest in, mentor and host young entrepreneurs.

Meanwhile hip Beirut design duo **Hoda Baroudia** and **Maria Hibri** created their brand **Bokja** to focus on content rather than their personalities. Bokja started as a noun - expressing their love of fabrics and cut-and-paste retelling of the history of the region, of women's lives, of craft. (A 'bokja' is the dowry bag embroidered for a woman by relatives - a kind of patchwork of memories). Later Bokja became a verb - to Bokjadize - applied to far more social issues - to Beirut's burning tyre protests, to Arab Spring, to Sufi spirituality. These are just two examples of many in the book. And despite their huge differences (one solid and business-like, the other wildly creative and bohemian) they both exemplify three pillars of Made With (rather than Made By):

- 1) They focus on the craft (doing business and making furnishings, respectively)
- 2) They focus on the relationship with community and social values
- 3) They fluidly adapt influences from both East and West into new fusions

It's all reminiscent of the rise of Japanese brands in the 1970s (drawing on a different aesthetic and more collective values than 'America Dream' brands). But we shouldn't take that analogy too far. Where Japan is restrained and formal, the Arabic and Levant cultures are exuberant, richly emotional and expressive, in love with words and worldly goods. Also, this is not the 1960s, this is today's networked societies, where ideas catch on in a whole new way.

It's the world that gave rise to the Arab Spring. Like the Arab Spring it's a bit early to see where emerging world brands are really heading. Yet like Arab Spring it is perhaps inspiring anyway to encounter the creative products of societies where history is in the making.

*John Grant is co-founder of St Luke's, consultant and author of new book **Made With (The Emerging Alternative to Western Brands)**.*

COMMENTS /