According to classical Western social theory, the institutions, networks, and projects of civil society operate in a pluralistic, continuously contested public civic realm. Distinctional elements of civil society range from micro-level autonomous organizations to macro-level, non-profit, voluntary sector of modern society. Viewed differently, the civic realm is a zone where culture interacts with politics and economics. Recent research shows that civics activism involves communicating, demonstrating, donating, organizing, and participating in events and projects that affect community services, public opinion, and national politics – vary across countries and at different times. The question is whether cultural ‘traditions’ explain why the civic sphere is more vibrant in some places and periods than others.

It is important to distinguish a moral economy or ‘primal civic realm’ from modern civil society. Historically, Middle Eastern communities provided themselves with collective water supplies, dispute management, schooling, way-stations, marketplaces, sanitation, policing and other municipal or community services through mechanisms including waqf, zakat, sadaq, alms, guild, tribal or ad hoc initiatives. Although states foresee to centralize legal practice, religious titles, and private initiatives, placing social and collective projects reflecting a mix of Muslim piety, political contention, and economic rationality were a centripetal force. In the case of Yemen, philanthropic and communal mechanisms for fund-raising and maintaining collective goods, grounded in a pre-capitalist social formation, gave towns what was a zone for contestation of the allocation of scarce resources. It is also important not to romanticize medieval projects. Almost at the same time there was a Middle East, governments have captured funds in the form of personal donations, zakat, and education, offering in return public-sector sanitation and infrastructure. Currently there is a veritable explosion in numbers of Arab NGOs, formal organizations that register with the government as non-profit if-funding bodies. Nowhere in the Arab world (if anywhere), however, has the expansion of civic space been a V-shaped opening, smooth and regular. With the widening andwaning of economic fortunes and with greater or lesser government success in opting autonomous initiatives, exigencies and outlets change. My research on twenty-centuries of Yemen documents three quite distinct periods of civic animation. In the modern enclaves of late-colonial Aden, class-based labor syndicalism formed, generating a zone of public civic realm. In the late-colonial, the sort of public-manifestation associations filling inclusive public spaces both physically and metaphorically – the streets, salons, schools, publications, legal loopholes, and access to the Yemeni and British public opinion. On the efflorescence of civic activity, the Yemeni self-help (t'a'um) movement, peaked in the 1970s when recycled mismatched finances, road primary schools, mechanized water retrieval, and the first electric villages. In many cities, towns, and villages. Activism in the ‘90s has been characterized, on the one hand, by unprecedented etiopatriotic, formal political organizing. The publishing, and holding of public events; and, on the other, by significant growth of the charitably voluntary sector whose projects include emergency relief, welfare programs, health clinics, informal and parochial education. The sudden, rapid expansion of political space after unification and its constitution after 1994, together with deeper economic conditions, prompted particular responses from various segments of urban and rural society. Different movements have been reactionary or progressive, resisting or inviting commercial markets and/or central political activism. Civic activism tends, then, to be episodic, opportunistic, and contingent, as people act on concrete local circumstances. When culture is a constant, it cannot explain such wide discrepancies. Of course activism is expressed in Arabic, with ample references to local, Yemeni, or Islamic tradition. Yet what an array of ‘traditions’ to choose from – a treasure chest of symbols, customs, and sayings for special occasions. Whereas in an era of road-building, ranchers adapted tribal auto-taxation mechanisms to hire building, in wide range tribesmen to roadsides to combat the antagonistic state at bay. "Declarations of public opinion" issued by conferences and available on newsstands, republican, tribal, sharia, Greek, socialist, historical, and internationalist phrases and concepts in a real, literal space of public debate and merchant’s associations enables forms of social capital formation, charitable donations are solicited in the name of ‘new tradition’, the formalized jamiiyya Khayriyya, the social-security of Ibn Khaldun, an Islamic, commercial Islamic banks.

Researching Civic Activists in the Arab World

The Prince Claus Fund, in addition to the awards, offers funding, produces publications, stimulates world-wide cultural debate, and supports activities and initiatives which emphasize innovation and experimentation.

The 1998 Prince Claus Award was awarded to the Art of African Fashion represented by three leading figures in that field: Azzah Tabbar (Niger); Oumou Sy (Senegal), and Tettah Adzedu (Ghana). Thirteen other Prince Claus Awards were presented to individuals from the world over. Three of these merit special mention here.

Redza Piyadasa

Redza Piyadasa (Malaysia) devotes himself both to the practice and to the theory of art. During the sixties and seventies he filled a serious vacuum in his country. His contributions are the result of a passionate controversy on the subject of art history or art criticism in his country. This was a period of creative activity, his art criticism are his answer to the vacuum, at a time when there was scarcely any critical approach to the arts. With his Freiheit, opposition to the political regime, to the economic situation, to the status of women, to the dominance of the English language, and to the commitment in their work in the domains of art, culture, and social science. The 1998 winners have proven the capacity to bring about fundamental changes in their surrounding environments and thus deserve the recognition and encouragement that the Prince Claus Awards, which are means to be the otherwise little-known efforts of these individuals recognized worldwide.

For further information on the 1998 laureates, for more information on the Prince Claus Awards, published by the Prince Claus Fund, is available at: www.princclaussfund.org

E-mail: post@prclaus.nl

Dr Sheila Caparico, Department of Political Science, University of Richmond, USA.